THE RESOLVE

(English Translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel ‘Sankalp’)

SANKALP

(Original Maithili novel authored by

Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal)

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English Translation

by

Dr. Arun Kumar Mandal

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(English Translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel 'Sankalp')

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated into English from the original Maithili

by

Dr. Arun Kumar Mandal

Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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English Translation of the Maithili Novel Sankalp
Original Author: Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal
English Translation: Dr. Arun Kumar Mandal

The Resolve is the English translation of Sankalp, the acclaimed Maithili novel by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, rendered with literary precision by Dr. Arun Kumar Mandal. Set in the village of Bhagyapur, the novel offers a sober portrayal of rural life in pre-Independence India, shaped by overpopulation, feudal dominance, and enduring economic uncertainty. Land and livelihood define the boundaries of existence, making poverty and hunger structural realities rather than accidental hardships.

The narrative centres on Gyanachan, whose response to the birth of his son takes the form of a quiet yet determined resolve: to secure the education he himself was denied by circumstance. This decision unfolds amid the daily rhythms of village life, alongside characters such as Savitri, Vicharchan, and Devan, whose lives are marked by loss, duty, and moral endurance.

The translation preserves the restraint and clarity of the original, using measured narration and intimate scenes to reflect the quiet moral strength with which ordinary people face suffering, responsibility, and the continuity of life.

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Let. Shri Domu Mandal

To the cherished memory of my father,

Late Shri Domu Mandal,

whose quiet strength, values, and blessings

remain with me always.

Foreword

Jagdish Prasad Mandal, the recipient of Sahitya Academy Award, has been a prolific and prominent writer in Maithili literature. He has left no genre untouched and has produced substantial works across the entire spectrum of Maithili literature. His contribution to the field of Maithili language and literature is immense and immortal. His writings mirror a deep engagement with rural life, folk cultures and the socio-economic realities of the Mithila region. He employs a language that is lucid yet suggestive, enabling him to brilliantly portray the inner world and lived experiences of ordinary life which provides his writing a sense of social realism and emotional urgency. Rather than idealizing rural life, he depicts it with a critical sense and sensibility subtly highlighting social inequalities, the declining condition of cultural values and the conflicts emerging from the conflict between tradition and modernity. His responsibility is not just bounded to creative writings alone, he has also contributed immensely to promoting Maithili language, enriching its literary tradition during a crucial phase of linguistic recognition. All his significant works have been translated into various Indian languages including English and have left an indelible imprint on the consciousness of readers across the globe. Hence, he is regarded as the doyen of Maithili literature.

The narrative centres on Gyanachand, whose deep joy and pride at the birth of his son lead him to make a life-altering pledge- to ensure that the child receives the education he himself was deprived of. His firm resolve unfolds within the colourful fabric of rural life, enriched by the customary festivities of the Pamariya

community and the ceremonial blessings offered by hijra performers. As he quietly strives to fulfil this commitment, the supporting characters such as Savitri, Vicharchan and Devan lend emotional depth to the plot. Through their encounters with grief, responsibility and sacrifice, they embody the enduring strength and understated dignity that define the familial and ethical world of the village.

Language is much more than a tool for communication; it is the vessel of a civilization's soul. It carries its history, its metaphors, and its unique way of seeing the world. When a work is translated from one language to another, the greatest challenge is not merely to exchange words, but to transport the "heart" of the original text into a new cultural setting.

It gives me immense pleasure to introduce this English translation of Dr. Arun Mandal. Having reviewed the manuscript, I can say with confidence that this is a remarkable achievement in the field of literary translation.

To translate from Maithili rich in heritage, regional nuances, and deep-seated metaphors- into English is a challenging task. Yet, Dr. Arun Mandal has navigated this bridge with extraordinary skill. From a linguistic perspective, the prose is fluid and natural. It avoids the stiffness that often spoils literal translations, choosing instead a vocabulary that resonates with the modern English reader.

From a cultural and metaphorical angle, this work is truly superb. The translator has not simply substituted words; he has translated the experience. Cultural idioms and metaphors that are deeply rooted in the Mithila soil have been handled with such care that their essence remains intact even in English translation. The reader is able to feel the rhythm of the original thoughts, the weight of the emotions, and the specific fragrance of the cultural landscape.

Mithila is a region known for its profound literary and

philosophical contribution, recognizes the importance of such high-quality translation. It is through works like this that our local and national narratives find a global voice.

I congratulate the translator, Dr. Arun Mandal, for the depth of the original content, and for their brilliant technical and artistic execution.

This book is a testament to the fact that while languages may divide us, the beauty of well-translated literature serves as a bridge that brings us all closer together.

I highly recommend this work to students of literature, linguistics, and anyone who appreciates the art of storytelling across cultural boundaries.

- Prof. (Dr.) Manju Roy,
Dean, Faculty of Humanities,
Lalit Narayan Mithila University,
Darbhanga, Bihar

Preface

A writer is often encountered before being fully understood. In my case, the encounter with the literary world of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal began quietly, without any deliberate plan or academic intent. In 2011, when he was honoured with the Tagore Literature Award, I took serious notice of his name for the first time. Until then, he had only been a passing presence in my awareness.

Literary awards do not create literature, but they often serve as entry points for readers yet to discover the depth of a writer's engagement with life. The award sparked my curiosity, which eventually led me to his short story collection Gaamak Jinagi.

Reading Gaamak Jinagi was far from a routine act of literary consumption. It was a deeply unsettling experience. The world depicted in those stories was at once familiar and piercingly honest: rural labour, poverty, humiliation, endurance, and a quiet insistence on dignity. These were not stories crafted to impress; they emerged from lived reality. The precision with which ordinary life was observed and rendered left a lasting impression on me. It became clear that this was not an author concerned with ornamentation or theoretical abstraction, but one compelled to write because life demanded it.

In the years that followed, I longed to explore more of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's work. However, professional instability, personal responsibilities, and a prolonged period of unemployment prevented me from engaging with his literature as consistently as I would have liked. The desire remained, but it lacked the discipline and continuity

required for serious reading.

That changed in 2020 when I was appointed as a professor and joined Ram Krishna College, Madhubani. With institutional stability came intellectual focus, and I returned to Jagdish Prasad Mandal's writings with renewed seriousness.

The Sahitya Akademi Award conferred upon him in 2021 for his novel Pangu was not merely a recognition of a single text; it was an affirmation of a lifelong literary commitment. Following this, I began a sustained reading of his novels. Each work revealed an independent moral universe, yet all were united by a consistent ethical orientation: an unflinching engagement with lived reality and a refusal to romanticise suffering. His writing does not seek sympathy; it seeks understanding.

It was during this period that I encountered the novel Sankalp. From the very beginning, it became clear that this was not simply another addition to his body of work. Sankalp reads like a concentrated expression of lived experience. Every paragraph carries weight, and nothing feels incidental. Crisis in this novel is not an isolated event but a persistent condition. Poverty, illness, social pressure, ritual authority, and unequal access to education form a continuous field within which human life unfolds. The novel asks a demanding question: how does one continue living with moral clarity when survival itself becomes uncertain?

At this point, the idea of translation emerged. The decision was not immediate. Many of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's works lay before me, each deserving attention. For a long time, I was unable to decide which text should be translated first. His books resist easy ranking, as each opens a distinct window into human experience. Yet Sankalp stayed with me. It invited repeated readings. Gradually, it became clear that this novel possessed a universality that extended far beyond its regional setting. Though deeply rooted in pre-Independence Mithila, its concerns–education, gendered responsibility,

widowhood, ethical agency, and the tension between tradition and reason–are recognisable across cultures.

This realisation led me to the decision to translate Sankalp into English. The task was undertaken with care. Translating from Maithili, a language rich in cultural nuance and emotional economy, into English involves more than replacing words. The real challenge lay in preserving the ethical atmosphere of the original text: its silences, its restrained emotions, and its unhurried narrative rhythm. I approached this task not as a literal, word-for-word exercise but as a committed attempt to carry meaning, context, and moral intent across languages. This translation aims to be faithful not only to what is said but also to what is implied.

A brief glimpse into the life and literary orientation of Jagdish Prasad Mandal is necessary here. He stands among the foremost creators in modern Maithili literature, particularly known for bringing marginalised lives to the centre of literary discourse. His writing does not arise from ideological fashion but from lived experience. Rural labour, Dalit existence, women's endurance, illness, death, and social exclusion are not thematic choices for him; they are realities he has closely observed. His narratives are marked by restraint. He does not instruct the reader but places life before them and allows its contradictions to speak.

In Sankalp, this literary maturity reaches a compelling depth. The characters of Gyanachan and Savitri are not merely individuals; they represent two ethical orientations toward life. Gyanachan's resolve is grounded in the belief that education can secure a future beyond inherited suffering. Savitri, while sharing this commitment, anchors it in practical lived experience. After Gyanachan's death, it is Savitri who becomes the moral axis of the novel. Her struggle is not heroic in the conventional sense. It is marked by calculation, restraint, courage, and the refusal to disappear. Through her, the novel interrogates tradition not through rebellion, but through

judgment.

The novel does not offer easy resolutions. It avoids closure through ritual, marriage, or symbolic triumph. Instead, it insists on ethical continuity. Life moves forward through decisions, consultation, labour, and sustained resolve. In this sense, Sankalp is not about a single vow, but about the discipline of living responsibly over time.

At the end of this preface, a separate section outlining the theme, subject matter, and purpose of the novel has been included, as prepared earlier. That section situates The Resolve within a broader interpretative framework and complements this personal statement. My hope is that this English translation will introduce Jagdish Prasad Mandal's work to a wider, global readership and allow the moral seriousness of Maithili literature to be recognised beyond its linguistic boundaries. If this translation encourages readers to return to the original, then the effort has achieved its purpose.

Translation is an act of responsibility. This preface is an acknowledgement of that responsibility.

The Resolve (Sankalp) is a novel about how human life is shaped, tested, and remade under sustained pressure. Set in pre-Independence Mithila, it traces the gradual transformation of a rural household as it moves from fragile hope to collapse, and from collapse to disciplined reconstruction. The novel does not portray crisis as an exceptional moment; instead, it presents crisis as a prolonged condition generated by poverty, social hierarchy, ritual authority, and unequal access to knowledge. At its core lies a simple yet demanding question: How does life continue when support structures fail, and what form does moral resolve take under such conditions?

The story opens in Bhagyapur, a densely populated village governed by land relations, zamindari dues, and dependence on the monsoon. Here, poverty is not the result of individual failure, but a

structural inheritance. Floods, droughts, population pressure, and unequal landholding determine existence long before personal agency can emerge. In such a setting, survival is habitual rather than aspirational. Yet Bhagyapur is rendered with vivid material precision. Its ponds, wells, trees, seasonal streams, and land divided into high fields, middling plots, and low-lying chaur suggest a landscape of abundance, though they do not provide dignity or security. Most families remain marginal peasants or landless labourers. Social life is highly structured yet unequal, shaped by caste multiplicity and constant moral surveillance.

Within this world, the narrative turns inward to focus on Gyanachan's household, which is notable for its restraint, discipline, and internal cohesion. As Savitri goes into labour, Gyanachan's fear is neither abstract nor sentimental. It is rooted in lived experience, particularly the trauma of maternal death, and in the recognition that survival after such a loss requires more than mere endurance. The birth of Raghunath brings communal celebration, revealing a society that is both supportive and extractive. Blessings arrive with obligations. At this moment, Gyanachan makes the novel's first central resolve: a child becomes true wealth only through education, discipline, and long-term effort. Sankalp is established not as a fleeting impulse but as a sustained moral commitment.

This resolve is soon tested. In the year following Raghunath's birth, death enters the household. With the passing of Sudama and Dinbandhu, a world of inherited care, tenderness, and cultural memory begins to recede. Sudama's imaginative presence as a grandmother, expressed through her lullabies and forward-looking affection, marks the first emotional rupture. Gyanachan's sense of fatherhood shifts from hopeful aspiration to sober responsibility. Education returns, no longer as a dream but as a pressing obligation.

Savitri initially responds from the standpoint of daily survival. She balances work, ageing parents, children, and the demands of the

home. Yet she does not reject the resolve. By questioning it, she begins to reshape it.

The extended dialogue between husband and wife becomes the novel's philosophical hinge. Savitri challenges the gendered division of responsibility and asserts equality in thought and judgment. Marriage is reframed as a shared act of creation rather than a structure of hierarchy. Her symbolic reminder that both partners held each other's hands dismantles inherited assumptions. The decision to educate the child becomes a shared commitment, marking the family's first consciously collective sankalp.

Padav 3 affirms this shared direction before violently destabilising it. Raghunath's small act of bringing water becomes a domestic symbol of the family as a living unit of shared effort. Education returns as a contested issue, shaped by questions of timing and judgment. Savitri challenges rigid norms by pointing to the realities of village life, where opportunity does not follow fixed rules. The child's quiet assent signals readiness. Yet intention proves fragile. Routine begins to wear down commitment, and the future weakens under the weight of the present.

Crisis arrives suddenly in physical form. Gyanachan's chest pain at midnight transforms planning into fear. His declaration that he will not live fractures the household's sense of direction. Savitri does not collapse. She responds with action. A neighbourly conflict gives way to solidarity as Ratanlal and Sitli intervene. At this point, the novel introduces a vital moral resource: human connection that survives even when social harmony fails.

Padav 4 marks a turning point. After six months and five days of illness, the household is not only sick but also adrift. The narrative widens to reveal that this experience is not unique. Many village families unravel in similar ways under the same pressures. Gyanachan's resolve to educate his son erodes in the face of ongoing uncertainty. Time drains both strength and purpose.

Savitri now becomes the novel's true centre. Economically devastated, physically worn, and socially vulnerable, she faces the threat of widowhood. Alongside her fear of social punishment runs a refusal to disappear. She takes stock of what has been lost–the orchard sold, jewellery gone, debt rising, and land slipping away–but she does not surrender to despair. Five bighas remain. She still believes that learning is possible.

Here, the novel sharpens its ethical claim. Authority without learning is hollow. True competence must come before the right to instruct.

Gyanachan's death arrives without grandeur. In its wake, desperation exposes the exploitative underside of healing practices and ritual authority. Yet from this exhaustion emerges a dangerous clarity. Savitri begins to imagine life beyond the husband-centred household, not as a romantic ideal but as a practical necessity. At dawn, she turns to Vicharchan, a childhood friend of her late husband. Their interaction is morally complex and socially risky. Vicharchan responds with loyalty rooted in seriousness rather than sentiment, opening the novel's next ethical terrain.

The narrative then enters the prolonged aftermath of death, revealing grief as a regulated social process. Ritual absorbs mourning into procedure. Savitri's vulnerability as a widow becomes starkly visible. Custom is revealed not as a neutral inheritance, but as a mechanism that strips personal agency while invoking social propriety. Vicharchan negotiates tradition without outright rejecting it. He weighs cost, feasibility, and human sense against the rigidity of norms.

As the rites unfold, the novel deepens its critique. Conversations between Devan and Vicharchan reveal that ritual authority is neither uniform nor ethically stable. Customs vary between communities. What is called duty in one context becomes cruelty in another. The novel suggests that real morality lies not in

honouring the dead, but in protecting the living.

The psychological focus intensifies during the tenth-day crisis. Pre-dawn confusion mirrors the characters' internal dislocation. Natural rhythms begin to take on moral significance. Meaning becomes unstable, even as the world around them remains outwardly familiar. In response, Savitri, Devan, and Vicharchan form a fragile alliance to chart a workable path forward. Ritual emerges not as sacred truth, but as burden, cost, and surveillance. Survival demands judgment and courage, not theology.

The final movement spans fifteen years. Savitri rebuilds life through labour, discipline, and careful decision-making. Raghunath's educational success becomes a testament to sustained resolve. A marriage proposal introduces new pressures of status and brokerage, which Savitri resists through consultation rather than haste. When Raghunath asserts his own choice to remain a farmer, the novel deliberately avoids closure. Life is not resolved through ceremony, but through clarity, consent, and ethical continuity.

The Resolve ultimately argues that survival is not passive endurance. It is active, negotiated, and learned. Sankalp is not a single vow, but a lifelong practice.

Translation is an act of responsibility, not mastery. This translation invites the reader to engage slowly, without expecting ease or comfort. It does not alleviate suffering; it illuminates it. If *The Resolve* unsettles, it does so out of loyalty to the ethical gravity of the original, where life unfolds not through resolution, but through judgment, effort, and enduring commitment.

- Arun Kumar Mandal

Ramberai, Darbhanga, Bihar

30 September 2025

Translator's Acknowledgements

Translation may appear to be a solitary task, but no serious translation is completed in isolation. It grows from years of learning, guidance, encouragement, friendship and family support. While translating Sankalp into English as The Resolve, I was repeatedly reminded of those who have shaped my academic and personal journey. It is a privilege to acknowledge them with gratitude.

My foremost gratitude is due to Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, the author of Sankalp. I first heard him speak at a literary programme in Darbhanga and was deeply impressed by the harmony between his thoughts, words and actions. That impression led me to read Sankalp, and the novel moved me enough to inspire this English translation. The work is therefore not merely a literary engagement, but also a response to the author's life, vision and commitment. I remain sincerely grateful to him.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my teachers and mentors. I respectfully thank Prof. (Dr.) Satyendra Prasad Singh, Principal, JMDPL Mahila College, Madhubani, for his encouragement and support.

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My family has been the foundation of my personal and intellectual life. I remember with deep reverence my beloved father, Late Shri Domu Mandal, whose quiet strength, values and blessings continue to guide me. His memory remains a source of courage and inspiration.

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I am equally thankful to Pallavi Prakashan for undertaking the publication of The Resolve and bringing this English translation to a wider readership. I sincerely appreciate the care and support extended at every stage of publication.

Many others have encouraged me through their words, goodwill and companionship. Though it is not possible to name everyone individually, I remain grateful to all who supported me during this work.

I offer The Resolve to its readers with humility and gratitude. This translation has been made possible not by individual effort alone, but by the learning, affection, guidance and encouragement I have received from all those acknowledged above. Whatever merit it may possess owes much to their support; any shortcomings are entirely my own.

- Arun Kumar Mandal

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Amid the densely settled villages of Mithila, Bhagyapur was one such village. Before independence, that is, prior to 1947, its fate was no different from that of other villages caught in the web of royal authority and zamindari control. Just as the destinies of countless villages lay in the hands of kings and their courts, Bhagyapur's future was also determined by powers beyond its reach.

Today, we understand that the value of land determines its price. However, in pre-independence society, it was not just land whose value was fixed. Even revenue demands were predetermined, including arrears of land tax that could extend up to two years. If this revenue was not paid on time, the land would be auctioned, and the landholder would lose ownership. The property would then pass into the hands of the claimant.

While densely populated villages are not unique to Mithila, the region's rural areas are among the most crowded in the country. Comparisons with Kerala are also relevant, as rural Kerala, too, remains more densely settled than many other states. Centuries of colonial rule had already broken the backbone of the country. In addition, Mithila's dense population placed further pressure on limited land resources, naturally giving rise to poverty and hunger.

Meanwhile, the life of the farmer, dependent on the monsoon, continued under the constant shadow of uncertainty. Some years brought devastating floods that washed away fields, homes, and courtyards. Other years were marked by drought.

Everyone knows that even during twelve years of drought, Sita was born in Mithila, and the rains did fall. Long before her birth,

recurring droughts and irregular rainfall were already part of Mithila's history. This enduring relationship with hardship is one reason why Mithila has never ceased to exist.

At the time of independence, ponds and wells in neighboring villages would begin to dry soon after the month of Phagun. As the season progressed, most of them would remain empty, waiting in hope for the next year's rains. In this respect, Bhagyapur was fortunate. But in what sense was it fortunate? Unlike other villages, not all of Bhagyapur's sixteen ponds and wells dried up or turned into barren basins. The village also had a seasonal stream, which the locals did not consider marginal or unreliable. From Aakhar to Agahan, it carried sufficient water, which coincided with a time when irrigation was not yet necessary.

One might ask whether wheat cultivation, which begins around Aasin to Kartik and requires irrigation after about twenty days, was even possible. Such questions belong to a much later period. Before 1971–72, wheat was not cultivated here at all. Whatever little was grown was done without the use of irrigation.

Although bread has become prominent today, it was once considered a secondary food in this region. As a result, it was not served to guests or honored visitors. Just as social norms of restraint and propriety existed in the past and continue to exist today, there have also always been people who, despite lacking power, defied these codes. They continue to do so even now. Because of this, the social fabric has long included two parallel streams–restrained families and unrestrained ones–coexisting side by side. This continues even today.

Bhagyapur is a village enriched with groves, trees, ponds, and wells. Just as it is abundant in natural resources, it is also home to settlements representing more than twenty castes. Being located on elevated land, the village has never experienced a shortage of homestead land.

There are three categories of land in Bhagyapur. The first is highland, the second is middle land where paddy is cultivated, and the third is known as chaur, or low-lying land. All three types are found here. Because there is sufficient elevated land for habitation, the people of Bhagyapur, unlike those in many other villages, have never been forced to dismantle their homes year after year. Nor have they faced disasters caused by fire or ash resulting from fragile dwellings.

As a densely settled village, Bhagyapur’s cultivable land and open tracts appear scattered, due to the absence of a single large or dominant landowning farmer. Most families belong to the category of middle-level cultivators. At the same time, the number of families without any agricultural land is by no means small.

Like any other village, life in Bhagyapur unfolds in many shades. The rhythm of life in a well-settled family is not the same as that in an unsettled one. This is neither new nor unusual. A person's physical appearance or bearing can shape life or deteriorate it. From an economic perspective, the structure of human life has never achieved uniformity, nor should it. It is only natural that the nature of a person’s development reflects the level of economic advancement they attain.

Suppose one holds the belief that giving children a good education is a sacred duty of parents. Many parents plant this resolve firmly within themselves. Yet, given the way the education system has evolved today, particularly in terms of cost and structure, how long can such a resolve remain steady in a parent’s mind?

Similarly, restrained food habits and other forms of conduct also exist. Restrained food refers to balanced nourishment. In villages and communities where, at the time of independence, even evening hearths often remained unlit, the idea of balanced nutrition could scarcely move beyond imagination.

The belief still endures that a human lifespan is one hundred

years, meaning that a person can remain capable and active for a full century. Yet one must ask: what kind of life pattern would make it possible to truly reach that milestone? Illness has no fixed residence in the body. Even with proper food and appropriate labor, how many people truly have access to these necessities? Disease is still disease, ranging from curable to incurable. Under such conditions, living a hundred years is no easy feat.

A family's life takes shape according to the condition in which it exists. What grows in a place grows accordingly. Gyanachan has little concern for such generalizations. His family consists of five members: his parents, his wife, himself, and one daughter. He tends and nurtures his household with the same care King Janak of Janakpur gave to his flower garden, seeking to present his home as a model of prosperity. To him, the entire world seems to exist within these five people. And why wouldn't it? In a society where daily quarrels between parents and children or between daughters-in-law and in-laws are common, Gyanachan's parents, even in their seventies, continue to value their family deeply.

They do not wish to waste their physical strength in the manner of reckless youth. Instead, they keep their bodies, minds, and resources active in harmony with time, ensuring that not a single hour of the day is lost. That, in itself, is a meaningful way of living.

This is not a recitation of Narad's aphorisms or some ancient moral sermon. It is simply a recognition that life must be shaped calmly and lived in step with the movement of time.

Within the family–that is, within Gyanachan's household–each day begins with motion and purpose. Every member is engaged in their own tasks, moving between moments of joy and distress. Gyanachan's mother, Sudama, has been alert since early morning, fully engaged in her responsibilities from the first signs of her daughter-in-law's labor pains. In the same way, her husband, Gyanachan's father, stands at the doorway like a devoted sentinel,

attentively waiting to fulfill whatever needs may arise.

Seeing his wife in pain, Gyanachan is deeply shaken. At the same time, with lowered eyes, he remains ready to accept and follow his parents' wishes without question. His anxiety is not without cause. He has seen, and heard of, many women in the village who have lost their lives during childbirth. Because of this, his mind is filled with fear. If his wife were to die, he would be plunged into a terrible calamity. He has a two-year-old daughter. If she were to lose her mother, would her future, including her marriage, ever be secure?

When Gyanachan reflects on his situation, he realizes that the care of his parents and daughter is managed jointly by him and his wife. If his wife were to die, the entire burden would fall on him alone. At present, he carries only his own share of responsibilities, which already feels like a half-load pressing down on his shoulders. Even so, he finds no peace, neither by day nor by night. If the full weight of the household were to fall upon him, what condition would he be left in?

Amid his anxious thoughts, another idea keeps recurring. If God were to grant him a son, and the child were to survive, then only when three generations–the elder, the father, and the son–stand aligned in a single line, can the spirit of the elder truly pass down. The strength of the soul, passed through action, would then enter the child and guide him into the life ahead. Is this not the pattern of life itself, that on one side it flows onward toward the sea, and on the other, it continues to give birth upon the earth?

By a fortunate turn of fate, Savitri gave birth to a son, and the house was filled with joy and relief. Exhausted by the pain of childbirth, Savitri lay breathless and drained, while Sudama, equally worn out, remained dedicated to performing the first rituals of care for the newborn. Only when every member of a family, though weary and worn, commits themselves to their responsibilities does a household gain the strength to lift its eyes and face the world.

It is also true that, however much darkness spreads across the world, light spreads alongside it. Yet darkness, striking with its own force, continues to expand the dominion of shadow. At times, blindness is born of religion, at others of wealth, caste frenzy, or communal division. Whatever the source, there remains in every heart the belief that a calm and joyful life is the highest form of living.

Among all living beings known to history, human beings stand as the most remarkable creation. With birth, everything is granted to them, which means that the human being arrives as both doer and shaper. If this is so, what unfulfilled desire can possibly remain beyond human reach?

In any case, such broader questions carry little meaning for Gyanachan. What matters to him is this alone: during childbirth, a woman must endure unbearable pain, the result of which is not only motherhood, but also the responsibility of safeguarding the future. In that very moment, upon hearing the announcement of his son's birth, Gyanachan forgot everything else and was overcome with joy.

In that blissful forgetfulness, something stirred within him, like tender shoots sprouting one by one from land left fallow. A realization dawned. A son is wealth, immense wealth. Yet such wealth becomes truly great only when it walks the greater path, looks ahead to a higher purpose, and advances toward meaningful action.

For that to happen, awareness is essential. And awareness arises only when the one who is guided learns to grasp it with discernment and moves forward with understanding.

All at once, Gyanachan's thoughts softened and reached the threshold where the line between father and son begins to blur. Returning to awareness, he looked toward his own father and began to reflect. When he himself was born, when he was of school-going age, there were no means of education nearby. There were no schools in the surrounding villages, and his father could not send him to study. But now, the situation had changed. Within the village itself,

institutions of education of various kinds and levels had come into being, and more were continuing to emerge. If a son had entered the family as a symbol of true wealth, then Gyanachan would devote his entire life to ensuring that the child received an education.

Carrying this resolve within him, Gyanachan moved forward and approached his two-year-old daughter. Upon hearing of his son's birth, his heart overflowed with joy, rising like milk boiling over a flame. How much pain a child must endure at birth, and how intense the mother's suffering is at that moment, only those who live through it can truly understand. And how deeply the father shares in that pain.

As soon as he reached Suchitra, his daughter, the words slipped from his mouth- "Daughter, play."

The innocent two-year-old had already heard from her grandmother that her father had arrived. A joy filled Suchitra's little heart, like the happiness that spreads through waking minds when the sun rises at dawn. When she looked at her father and was asked a question, she pointed with her finger and said- "Brother is in that house."

Hearing his daughter's words, a wave of emotion surged within Gyanachan. He had grown up in a middle-class farming family, cultivating about five bighas of land. And hearing the word "Brother" from his child's mouth only deepened that surge. As his emotions swelled, he began to reflect once again. When he was of school-going age, there had not been a single school in his village or even in the surrounding area. There were some Sanskrit institutions and colleges, but their limited resources meant that, although they were public in name, they were not truly accessible.

Another thought soon followed, one more fundamental in nature. What is the true essence of education? Why is schooling necessary? What purpose does education serve in life?

For thousands of generations, life had been inherited through

lineage in a manner not very different from that of animals. Whatever happened, wherever it happened, remained confined to that place. Gyanachan had little interest in such abstractions. Standing at a turning point in his family's history, he resolved that his son would receive an education for as long as he wished to study.

His mind remained restless with excitement. Because of this, he never once considered what kind of education might be best suited to what kind of life. Silently, he planted his resolve firmly within himself. Until now–up to his own generation–no one in his family had even seen the inside of a school. He would make sure the next generation did. With his thoughts still soaring, he held firmly to the belief that his child would study as far as he desired. How expensive education had become in the present time was something Gyanachan had yet to fully understand, for he himself had lived his life with only a basic level of learning.

Three months passed after Raghunath was born. By then, the pattern of family life that had formed around Gyanachan gradually settled back into its earlier rhythm. With that return came a shift in his mental state, meaning that his way of thinking also began to change. Thought follows its own path, shaped by circumstance, and each situation demands its own form of reflection. If this does not happen, one either keeps stumbling while trying to imitate the previous generation or fails to recognize the mountain standing ahead.

Beside the village lay 'Pamariya village'. It was known as Pamariya for two reasons. First, there were no families of the Pamariya caste in the surrounding villages. Second, by occupation, the people of this caste performed Pamariya work in the neighboring areas.

Early in the morning, Pamariyas arrived at Gyanachan's house in groups of five. Beating the duggi, they began to dance in the courtyard, chanting- "Victory to the child, victory to the child." One

by one, people from nearby courtyards also began to gather.

During these three months, the rhythm of life in Gyanachan's household had continued without disrupting work in the fields or daily chores at home. Although the added responsibilities placed some strain on the family, and new expenses began to weigh on them financially, the overall routine remained largely undisturbed. This gradual pressure brought a kind of stillness to Gyanachan's thoughts, as though his mind had entered a pause, allowing reflection.

On hearing the Pamariya chants, the hearts of everyone in the family–from parents to grandparents–leapt with excitement. As the energy in the house grew, each person felt an urge, inspired by their own joy, to shower Raghunath with gifts in various forms. A group of five Pamariyas, though sometimes only one or two arrive, is considered a complete visit, accompanied by music, dance, and traditional instruments. Their presence heightened the atmosphere in the household. On one side, preparations were made for the Pamariya performance; on another, arrangements were made for their food and drink; and elsewhere, space was organized for villagers who came to watch.

The three-month-old Raghunath appeared before all like a student who has passed a major examination with distinction, making not just his family but the entire district proud. In a similar way, his presence lit up the surroundings. Not only his own family, but people from other households as well, upon witnessing the celebratory dance, offered grains and money in his honor.

About a month later, after the Pamariya dance, a group of hijra dancers also arrived. In this region, because the number of hijras, or kinnars, is smaller than that of the Pamariyas, their dance takes place only once a year. It is performed across the entire village just once annually. In contrast, because the Pamariyas are more numerous, their dance occurs not only once a year but often several times within a single month, depending on the number of births. As many births

as occur, that many Pamariya dances follow. Everything happens in its own measure.

On this particular day, since Raghunath's celebratory dance was taking place in Gyanachan's courtyard, the entire family swayed with joy and delight, especially in celebration of the birth of a son.

A son is indeed considered a form of wealth, one long believed to redeem a family in both life and death. That belief still endures. Yet a son is not merely what people imagine him to be. Just as the foundation of any house, whether small or grand, lies hidden beneath the soil, so too is the foundation of human life–whether exalted or humble–rooted in childhood. The kind of foundation that is laid determines the kind of life that will emerge. This is no ordinary concern.

Today, society resembles fallow land. Within it, families stand like uncultivated fields where, in the absence of tilling and care, seeds fail to take root. In the same way, village society remains neglected in the realm of education. Even seventy-five years after independence, village life has yet to reach a point where even a quarter of its educational needs have been fulfilled.

The problems are countless, but the paths to solutions are many. What is required is a balance between the two.

As Gyanachan listened to the hijra-hijarani songs and the celebratory verses of blessing, he forgot everything else for a moment. Yet soon, his thoughts began to revolve around the image of his son's childhood. A son is wealth, the greatest wealth. But how can he, like Bhagirath, bring the celestial Ganges down to earth? For that, just as Bhagirath's seven generations of ancestors undertook penance, a similar discipline is still required today.

The rural social life that has existed until now, meaning the art of living itself, has had no clear direction toward the pursuit of knowledge. Further burdened by centuries of servitude, it has become

increasingly eroded, narrowing people's thinking so severely that they can scarcely glimpse the true light of life. In Gyanachan's mind, the resolve he had once planted for his son–I will educate him as far as he wishes to study–sprouted once again, like fresh leaves on a young shoot.

The raw rhythm of the hijra song echoed in Gyanachan's ears, shaking him like cotton spinning on a spindle, trembling again and again. Holding his resolve in his heart, he silently sought blessings from the hijras for Raghunath, hoping that as the child grew into a fine young man, he would always carry the glow and brightness upon his radiant face.

Gyanachan did not speak a word. The blessings he had received from the hijras had settled so deeply within him that his voice seemed to fall away. He felt no urge to speak, because without being asked, the hijras had already offered such abundant blessings that nothing more needed to be said. And really, what need was there to speak? Day and night, he had watched people in society repeat the same tired phrases– "Will it be three or thirteen?" –as if these expressions were permanently assigned to human mouths.

Once again, his resolve stirred within him. I will educate Raghunath as far as he wishes to study. As this thought awakened, a deeper truth revealed itself to him: that sons and daughters alike are the true wealth of society. Animals can sustain themselves simply by feeding, but human beings are not meant to live for survival alone. Just as milk placed on a clay hearth begins to boil and rise with the heat of the fire, Gyanachan's thoughts too began to swell. As they rose, another idea began to form.

Throughout the year, the hijras and Pamariyas would come bearing their blessings for his son. But why not also receive the blessings of society itself? A person becomes a true member of society only when he carries its weight upon his head as a sacred

responsibility.

Before lifting society upon one's head like a canopy, much as one covers oneself with cloth to shield against rain, one must first consider whether that covering is torn or full of holes. If it is, protection from the rain becomes impossible.

At this point, Gyanachan's thoughts paused. As they did, he smiled. Society too moves according to its own threads of order. Even if those threads are twisted here and there, the social fabric itself cannot be blamed. No matter how adverse the times may be, it is not true that service to one's parents ceases to be service. Even if life is lived in such a way that the most honourable parents are not reduced to dishonour, the truth of that service remains. However powerless the land of Mithila may appear, it has never been barren, nor will it ever be. Its fertility lies hidden in the womb of its soil. How many other lands in the world possess such strength?

By the time his thoughts reached this point, they came to rest. As they settled, he declared that a feast would be offered to society in celebration of his son's birth.

When his attention turned to the feast, Gyanachan's mind began to stir and churn. As it did, reflective thoughts arose. Until now, the customs in the region had included either a rice feast or one of puris and sweets. Some time ago, it was known as puri and curry, and now it had come to be puri and sweets, or chura and curd. Though these arrangements are closely related, each has its own distinction. He felt it would be better to bring them into harmony and organize a feast of kheer and puri, a feast that would make history and linger on people's tongues.

As Gyanachan began to plan the arrangement for the kheer and puri feast, his thoughts began to speak within him, "In a rice feast, rice is paired with lentils, and that same rice, when joined with milk, becomes kheer. In puri with curry or puri with sweets, the puri

remains the same, and the sweet, when joined with milk, becomes kheer. Is this not life itself, that we move from ignorance, like the first letter ‘a’, toward knowledge, like the final letter ‘gya’, and come to live a life filled with understanding?"

All at once, Gyanachan’s mind settled. He resolved that he would offer his devotion itself as an offering on the occasion of his son’s birth. ❑

2.

When a full year had passed after Raghunath's birth, both Sudama and Dinbandhu passed away. From the moment Raghunath was born, Sudama had kept the child pressed close to her chest for hours on end. From the tender form of her grandson, held near her heart, countless blossoms of hope began to bloom. Visions of a radiant, sun-like child glowing in many colours danced before her eyes.

She imagined him sleeping in a cradle, small rattles hanging above, delighting him with their play of hands and faces. Tomorrow, when he turned three, she would sit him on her lap and tell him the stories and legends passed down from his father and forefathers. With the evening lamp at dusk and the offering tray at dawn, she would sing to him the songs of the twelve months such as the barahmasa, chhamasa, chaumasa, along with lullabies and ceremonial songs. As her thoughts wandered to lullabies, Sudama began to hum softly- "Lalna he…"

A year later, as Raghunath grew stronger, Gyanachan too became aware of his responsibilities as a father. That awareness, however, was centred solely on Raghunath. The life Gyanachan had shared with his own father from childhood through to their present work together remained unchanged. The cart of the household, which had once moved slowly and steadily, continued in the same manner.

Even so, he knew in his heart that while life is steadfast, it is also fragile. Like an iron engine without a fixed timetable, human life can end at any moment, slipping away like air from a punctured balloon. Looking at one-year-old Raghunath standing before him,

Gyanachan's heart swelled with joy. Raising his voice, he called out to his wife- "Come here for a moment."

Hearing the sharpness in her husband's tone, Savitri stepped closer and asked- "What is it?"

Until now, the resolve Gyanachan had planted deep within himself for his son had not travelled beyond his own heart into another's ears. But seeing Raghunath at the age of one, his mind came to rest. All the illnesses and frailties of infancy that usually trouble a child in the first year had passed Raghunath by. As the second year approached, even the bodily ailments began to fade one by one, and the child appeared to be free from many dangers.

Gyanachan then said- "The day Raghunath was born, a thought was planted in my mind. By the sixth day, that thought had already taken the form of a sixth-night resolve."

Savitri understood something of her husband's thoughts, though much of it remained unclear. That was why she spoke plainly and without hesitation- "What do you mean by a thought? The whole world is full of thoughts. Everyone thinks about something or other. But the thought that has taken root in your mind, you haven't told me that at all. Why all this tension? This is our family. With the child, the four of us are together. When Mother and Father were alive, we were six. Now from six, we have become four. Time will come again, and from three, we shall become thirteen."

Gyanachan heard part of his wife's words and ignored the rest. Whenever his resolve regarding Raghunath stirred within him, he became deaf to everything else. Only when his thoughts settled and grew firm did he begin to listen. Overcome with emotion, he said- "I never had the chance to learn to write even a single letter or read a book. The times were not favourable, so it could not happen. But now that is no longer the case. Raghunath will study as far as he wishes."

Savitri had not yet grasped the deeper meaning of education.

Surprised and puzzled, she replied- “What you have said has not settled clearly in my mind.”

Gyanachan’s thoughts about his son’s education had soared so high that, at times, he could already see the boy rising before his eyes. Hearing his wife’s question, his mind gathered strength. With firmness, he said- “He is our son. He will become what we make of him.”

Unable to fully understand her husband’s half-formed thoughts, Savitri hesitated and said- “Does anyone distribute sons, that you speak of one’s own and another’s?”

Drawing his scattered thoughts together, Gyanachan pointed toward Raghunath and said- “At this moment, are we not the first guides of this child Arjun in his infant form, just as Krishna once was?”

Savitri did not quite grasp the idea of guru and disciple in relation to parents and children. Yet she understood this much: the child they were looking at belonged entirely to both of them. After all, husband and wife together create the world of a child, and they alone shape it as well. Smiling, Savitri said- “Why only guides? Along with being the givers of birth, are we not also the givers of action?”

Hearing the words “givers of birth and givers of action” from his wife’s lips struck Gyanachan like the sharp crack of flint. Just as the mind shapes the atmosphere, the atmosphere in turn shapes the mind. The same happened to him. Almost without thinking, he drew Savitri closer into his heart and said- “Raghunath is many things, but above all, he is our wealth, the wealth of a son. How that wealth becomes a wealth honoured by all is something the two of us must think about together.”

Just as someone, even while remaining slightly distant, tosses an object from one hand into another, Savitri cast off her burden

lightly and said- "There are two children, a son and a daughter. The burden of one rests on your shoulder, the burden of the other on mine."

Hearing his wife's words, Gyanachan cautioned himself inwardly and reflected- "Just as there are countless colours in the relationship between a man and a woman, so too are there countless differences between them. By nature, a man may be somewhat coarser, and a woman a little gentler. Yet within the current of life that flows between the two, sons and daughters also float along. In such a situation, it would not be right for each of us to carry separate, divided burdens. It would be better if, together, according to our shared responsibilities, we both carried the weight of both children."

Almost immediately, another thought struck him. It occurred to him that such reflections were only possible because both he and his wife were alive. There were children in the world who had no mother, and others who had no father. How, in such lives, could burdens ever be divided this way?

His thoughts then moved in a different direction. There were children whose parents had died, yet someone else still raised and cared for them. Life takes many forms, some nurturing, some harmful. And even the young of wild animals do not always perish when abandoned. Many survive, just as many do not.

Wherever Gyanachan looked, he seemed to see long pathways, tall trees and forests, seas and mountains rising again and again before him. Suddenly, his thoughts came to rest at the boundary of his own family. The presence and influence of his son and daughter filled his heart with emotion. He said- "As long as both of us are alive, why should the burden of the son be mine alone, and the burden of the daughter be yours alone? Let it be this instead: you take care of my work, and I will take care of yours. There should be no negligence that might affect the lives of the children."

In a family formed by a man and a woman, if the man fulfils

his rights and duties with honesty, and the woman likewise upholds hers, then the family surely becomes a living part of the world. Just as the world things contains bitterness, it also holds sweetness. To one person, it tastes bitter; to another, sweet.

In this vast, ocean-like world, Gyanachan's thoughts began to surge and churn. As they did, the image of Mahadev in his half-female form rose before him. His mind whispered that this, too, was a sacred crossing point where the flow between duality and oneness is revealed.

Gyanachan spoke as though assuming the voice of fatherly authority. Almost at once, he rebuked himself inwardly and thought- "Until now, this shortcoming has remained within us. As husband and wife, how do we shape a shared vision of the family, from birth through action, so that it may grow and flourish? In bodily form, there is indeed a sexual difference between man and woman, but in all else, there is equality. The distance that appears to exist in thought is the result of the family's and society's environment. Social environment is itself a form of governance. When parents, as mother and father, align their responsibilities with time, beginning from the moment a child is born, then the child too adjusts and grows in step with time. At turning points in time, sudden changes arise, affecting society and family alike. When the family is affected, the individual is affected as well. To teach children how to adapt to these influences in harmony with time is what guidance truly means.

We speak of philosophy, yet there is a difference between merely seeing and truly understanding. The philosophy of life belongs to every human being, yet it has been so carved, reshaped, and distorted that we can no longer tell whether we are living like flying beings or flying corpses."

Savitri said- "A son may be a man's son, but he comes into the world from a mother's womb. To snatch away what belongs to another's body and remake it entirely in one's own image cannot be

right."

Seeing his wife turn away, Gyanachan said- "Now the two of us must forget the world and build our own world together. If we do not do this for the next generation, that generation will be lost."

Savitri's mind did not dwell on his other words, but the phrase "the next generation will be lost" struck her sharply. If the next generation were to be lost, then the family itself would be destroyed. And if the family were destroyed, how could the next generation ever grow? Her thoughts churned like muddy water stirred from the depths. Grasping that muddy current, her mind began to boil and rise. Astonished, she said- "Have I ever run away from responsibility because of my thoughts? In this house and family, society already sees you as the one who acts and decides. No matter how capable a woman may be, she is still confined within the home."

Gyanachan said- "Let us set aside talk of woman and man for now. A man can carry what is called womanly, and a woman can carry what is called manly. So it is not true that a woman is only a woman or a man is only a man. Both exist together. Families in society take many forms, and some distance always exists from one family to another. The economic sphere is the one that affects life most deeply, and from it arise many kinds of inequality. One problem often gives birth to another, even as it is solved. But not all that now. For the moment, I want only this to settle in your mind as well, that our son should be educated according to his own wish."

Hearing her husband's words, Savitri was carried into a current of thought where many colours began to rise within her mind. The first thought was this: just as it is considered a sacred duty for a wife to absorb her husband's thoughts, is it not equally true that a husband should take his wife's thoughts into his own mind? Almost at once, her thoughts moved ahead, testing their own strength. As long as a wife remains merely a dependent in every way, how can her own thoughts ever be born?

Then another idea arose. Many people still live with the illusion that, just as society is male-dominated, families too have always been ruled by women like the Rani of Jhansi. History, however, tells a different story. Before marriage became an established institution, when life was more open, children born of the union of man and woman were cared for by the mother alone.

Astonished, Savitri said- “Your thoughts are lofty indeed. But tell me this: the day you brought me from my parents’ home, holding my hand, was it not you who held my hand, while I came with my fist closed?”

Hearing his wife’s words, Gyanachan was shaken to the core. The reason was that his own mind acknowledged she was right. Just as he had extended his hand and taken hers, she too had reached out and taken his. What is marriage, after all, if not the joint creation of an independent family by a man and a woman together? It had never occurred to him before that if the shaping of both bodies is the same, then surely the space for thought and reflection must also be the same.

A sense of quiet defeat arose within him. Yet again and again, another thought returned, that the challenge posed by a wife is one that remains alive every day.

Caught in confusion, Gyanachan fell silent. At times, it even seemed to him that the wife who had always remained beneath his shadow was now speaking from higher ground. Pressing the matter, Savitri said- “Why have you grown so withdrawn? If you lower your head before your wife, you will be able to raise it before the world.”

Turning his steps inward, Gyanachan replied- “You have offered such thoughts that, just as a traveller rides a boat to roam upon a lake, the mind too begins to sway and drift upon the currents of family thought. Tell me then, how is a family to keep moving forward?”

Understanding the weight of the moment, Savitri said- “The

movement of a family is bound to action. That action must be accepted jointly by both partners and shaped by a shared understanding. From past to future, one must look carefully at present conditions and move forward accordingly."

Delighted, Gyanachan said- "Whatever happens in the world is one matter. What truly matters is the social structure of that place and the structure of our own society. It is in keeping with that structure that we must shape ourselves."

His words settled into Savitri's mind. As they did, her attention turned to her son. Looking at Raghunath, she said- "Just as a group of people–two, three, four, or five–moves forward by forming a resolve for a definite course of action, life too is attained only by continuing to move ahead, step by step. To educate Raghunath according to his own wish, that is not the resolve we both share."

Hearing his wife's words, a quiet radiance rose within Gyanachan's heart. ❑

3.

Raghunath had turned four and a half. Clear words had begun to flow from his mouth, and he had started taking on small tasks around the house and courtyard at his parents' bidding.

One morning, around ten o'clock in the month of Chaitra, Gyanachan returned home from somewhere. He said to his wife- "Bring a tumbler of water."

Hearing his father's voice, Raghunath brought the tumbler himself and reached his father just as Savitri arrived as well. When Savitri's eyes fell on her husband, something stirred within her. When Gyanachan looked at his wife, he felt the same. The same thought rose in both their minds: this is family, these are companions and children.

Only when family members begin to share responsibilities according to their strength does the work of the household move forward smoothly. A family is not a joke. In a household of five, there are as many needs as there are in the administration of a state. Unless essential work–that is, the necessary duties of the family–is carried out steadily and without neglect, how can results ever be obtained?

Outcomes may be favourable or unfavourable, but that is not the concern now. What matters is that when all the needs of the family are met by its members according to their capacity, only then does the family stand on its own feet. If, in every family, each person–that is, each family member–takes their place in the right direction, then surely the nation too will stand firm.

The question is, does a person find happiness in seeing their family fall, or in seeing it stand strong? That is the secret of society.

Everyone carries the same wish in their heart, that there be well-being for oneself and for one's family. Yet the mystery remains why, despite this wish, it so often goes unrealised.

After drinking the water, Gyanachan said- "Raghunath is four and a half now. In six months, we will get his name enrolled in school."

At the mention of sending a child from the womb of one's care to school, Savitri became so absorbed within herself that her gaze travelled far beyond her husband's words, reaching that place where every parent's eyes go when they imagine a son educated and accomplished. Lost in the forest of her thoughts, she remained silent.

Seeing his wife's closed lips, Gyanachan assumed she was already thinking deeply about their son's admission to school and had nothing to say.

Suddenly, Savitri spoke- "Why wait for six months? Why not enrol the child in school today itself?"

Bound to the line he had drawn for himself, Gyanachan replied- "Everyone considers it proper to admit a child to school only after five years."

By the reckoning of the month of Kartik, Raghunath had in fact become fit for school admission six months earlier, right after he had crossed four years. Yet the idea of five years, fixed in Gyanachan's mind, had become an obstacle. In today's context, children as young as three are being admitted to school, but until not long ago, five years was the accepted minimum age. The main issue in the gap between three and five years is nourishment, malnutrition versus proper nutrition. The kind of nutrition children receive today was not available in earlier times. A child raised with poor nourishment was often not physically fit to attend school or engage in study.

Savitri said- "If we had enrolled Raghunath in school six months ago, by now he would at least have learnt his name and

village. So…"

Saying "so," Savitri fell silent. But that word struck Gyanachan's mind like an arrow. In a single breath, he repeated it three or four times- "So… so… what do you mean by so?"

Seeing the anger rising in her husband's mind, Savitri said- "When a good thought comes to mind, that is the time to begin acting on it. There should not be even the slightest delay."

Shaking off the agitation in his mind, Gyanachan replied- "Society accepts that a child becomes fit to go to school only after completing five years."

Just as a ripe mango may fall when a stone is carelessly thrown into a mango tree–and the thrower takes it as a deserved reward– Savitri released an uncalculated arrow of words and said- "If it is universally accepted in society that a child should be admitted to school only after five years, then why is there so much deception and manipulation around admission age?"

Here, it is not being claimed that job culture alone has given rise to such tendencies.

Gyanachan did not fully grasp Savitri's point, because on hearing the phrase "deception and manipulation," his mind drifted to children's games of hide and seek. Confused, he asked- "What kind of deception and manipulation?"

Just as the sight of something gained brings joy to the mind, Savitri too felt a quiet happiness rise within her. Smiling, she said- "There are many villages where there is no school. When, by chance, a school opens there, should only those children who are already studying elsewhere be allowed to take admission?"

Gyanachan replied- "Yes."

Hearing this "yes" from her husband, Savitri smiled and continued- "In the area where a school or college opens, the children of that area will naturally take admission there. But there are

differences even among children. Some are drawn toward reading and writing, while others are not. Even now we see this in schools. In villages where schools exist, many children still do not study seriously. Their minds do not settle on books, but they take greater interest in tending cattle or working with buffaloes. In the same way, there are children whose minds do not take to cattle work but are drawn naturally toward learning and study."

Hearing his wife's words, the light in Gyanachan's eyes began to flicker like a wavering lamp. A thought arose within him: life needs both paths. It cannot move forward on learning alone, nor on labour alone. It moves only when the two are blended in a form suited to life itself. This is what is also called bhakti yoga, the union of knowledge and action.

When schools open in a region, just as some children older than the prescribed age adjust their age to gain admission, there are also those whose desire to attend school is strong even though they are younger. They too manage to enter by increasing their stated age. And of course, there are also those whose age fits exactly.

All at once, Gyanachan's mind came to rest. As it settled, a new thought arose. When there was only a difference of six months in the thinking between the two of them, why not place Raghunath between them, like a stake set at the edge of a pond, and ask him directly, as if making an offering to society?

Turning toward Raghunath, Gyanachan said- "Son, tomorrow we will get your name enrolled in school."

Hearing his father's words, Raghunath looked toward his mother. With a movement of her eyes, Savitri conveyed her victorious thought to him. Receiving his mother's signal, Raghunath said- "Very good."

Hearing the words "Very good" from his son's mouth, Gyanachan's mind seemed to light up. In that instant, a thought arose

within him: when a family understands the essential, foundational duties of life and aligns itself with them, that itself is family life.

Yet, shaped by temperament and, above all, by economic hardship within the household, a mother's mind often drifts away from a child's education toward other domestic urgencies. This does not mean that every mother is the same. Still, social surroundings, especially the immediate family environment, exert a powerful influence on a person, and from there the movement of thought takes shape.

Pressing upon her husband's resolve, Savitri said- "So it is settled, isn't it? Tomorrow we will get Raghunath's name enrolled in school."

If there had been even the slightest hesitation in Gyanachan's mind, he might have wavered. But there was none. In clear words, he replied- "Tomorrow, the foundation of our shared resolve will be firmly laid."

As the days passed, Gyanachan's attention became increasingly absorbed in other household matters, and the thought of enrolling Raghunath in school gradually slipped from his mind. It slipped so far that, from morning meals to nightfall, it did not surface at all.

After the day's drink and food, when Gyanachan lay down to sleep and placed his head on the pillow, the thought of the next day's task–enrolling Raghunath in school–suddenly struck his mind. In a way, it was good that he had forgotten it throughout the day. Otherwise, instead of attending to the necessities of the present, he would have exhausted himself chasing the dreams of the future. When the work of today falters, the course of life itself begins to erode. It is the present that shapes the path of tomorrow's dreams, and if erosion sets in there, the road ahead inevitably turns thorny.

All at once, Gyanachan said to himself, why strain the head

unnecessarily, twisting thoughts like plaiting a braid? Savitri would not go to the school and write their son's name. He would have to go himself. And when the teacher asked Raghunath's age, he would say that in families like theirs, horoscopes were not recorded at birth, nor were they educated enough to maintain diaries. Let the teacher write whatever seemed appropriate according to the school's records and judgment.

The moment Gyanachan saw the straight road ahead, his mind began to steady itself. It had not fully settled when, like a stone thrown into a pond sending ripples across the water, a sudden tremor rose within him. The tremor came from the realisation that, until this day, the course of his family life–his own family's journey–towards the doors of Vidya Bhavan had remained strangely empty.

Until today, a lineage that had never even seen the face of a school would, tomorrow, take its child to the school gate. In the barren soil of despair, a ray of hope scattered itself before Gyanachan. This, in itself, became the first rung of change in life, in the life of the family. Change in life is, after all, the process of life's growth.

With his head resting on his arm, Gyanachan did not even realise when sleep came over him. Like a meditating ascetic devoid of consciousness, he slipped into a state of stillness.

At midnight, when his first spell of sleep had not yet been properly completed–for Gyanachan's initial sleep usually lasted five to five and a half hours–a sharp pain flared up in his chest. The moment the pain struck, his sleep shattered. As he woke, he called out softly to his wife- "Come here for a moment."

He kept the matter of the pain concealed in his mind because it was past midnight. If others heard, they would rush about in unnecessary panic, asking what had happened. Such pains in life do not occur just once; they come to people many times. Sometimes it is a headache, sometimes a stomach ache, sometimes pain in some other

part of the body. Some pains subside on their own, others are relieved through treatment.

Savitri's sleep, too, had broken, for ever since she had lain down, her mind had been circling around Raghunath. Her sleep had been so disturbed that it never deepened properly. Today, the child was to be admitted to school.

Savitri's thoughts had completely moved away from her own role within the household. They had shifted to a different question, on whose strength had Raghunath, until now, gained whatever awareness and recognition he had? Whether from the family, the neighbourhood, or through learning to recognise the objects and relationships of the household? She understood the weight of motherhood and had fulfilled her duties in her own way. Yet, a child is born like an unformed egg in water and gradually takes on the shape of a human being. Today, four-and-a-half-year-old Raghunath was exactly at that stage.

Had he reached this point on his own, or had he reached it because the right conditions were created for him?

Coming close to her husband, Savitri asked- "Why did you call out?"

The pain in Gyanachan's chest kept increasing until it became so intense that he lost all awareness. What had happened, how it was happening, he could not utter a single word. Before Savitri could repeat her question, he almost collapsed. In the meantime, with a gesture of his hand, Gyanachan pointed to his chest and tried to convey his pain.

When someone expresses pain in the chest, the heart itself, those who see and hear often feel as if their own chest might tear open. And yet, at the same time, they try to bind that torn chest of the other. But none of this existed for Gyanachan at that moment.

Should one say that he was like a disciplined sage, one of those

rishis who restrain even the greatest pain, striking it down within their own chest and enduring it in silence? Even that was not the case. Nor was he one of those who, at the slightest prick of a tiny thorn, create such a commotion before others–especially before their wives–as if a royal thorn had pierced straight through the foot. Gyanachan was neither of these.

By chance, his pain shifted slightly, and for a brief moment his mind flickered back to awareness. As that flicker came, he opened his eyes and saw his wife standing before him. Lowering his eyelids, Gyanachan said- "I will not live. The longing that remained in my heart will now remain unfulfilled. The responsibility of Raghunath rests with you."

Hearing her husband's words, Savitri's mind was struck dumb. It was stunned in that peculiar way in which a cheat believes that by deceiving another he proves himself clever, and in believing himself clever, turns cleverness into a kind of occupation, even an identity. Parents, too, often carry this desire, that the more clever, that is, the more intelligent their children become, the better it will be.

But Savitri's thoughts, upon hearing her husband, began to collapse inwardly. On one side, the man who had stood as the pillar of the family was slipping away. With that, a burden would fall upon her shoulders, the like of which she had never even imagined until now. On top of this, today itself the two of them had taken a joint resolve regarding Raghunath, that tomorrow they would take their son to the doorway of the school.

When fire breaks out, not only the house and courtyard of a family burn, but also all the possessions kept within them. The mind that existed before the fire suddenly finds itself in a desert where, despite everything seeming to be present, nothing truly remains.

Savitri seized hold of her burning mind and brought it under control. As she steadied herself, a thought arose. The resolve to admit

the child to school was meant for the following day. But with her husband in such a condition, this was not a moment for blind determination, the kind that insists on moving forward regardless of any mountain that might rise in the path. If the vehicle of life could not move forward without first crossing that mountain, then preparation for crossing it had to be made before anything else.

Holding fast to the resolve she had taken that day, Savitri reflected that her husband's condition would not improve without assistance from others. Therefore, the first step was to go to the neighbours and tell them she had fallen into grave trouble and had come seeking help.

However much people might try to erase compassion and moral duty, they are not so easily erased. As long as human beings exist, these qualities will exist as well. They were not born only today, nor will they vanish today. Even after human beings came into existence seventy lakh years ago, their life over the following fifty lakh years was not the same as that of animals walking on four legs. Humans have always moved with their feet and their hands. It may well be that twenty lakh years ago, they walked on their feet with both hands raised toward the sky.

With hope placed in the neighbours, Savitri bound her mind tightly, thinking that if someone had fallen screaming from an aeroplane accident, no one could revive that scream, nor would anyone willingly die alongside them.

Reaching the neighbour's house, Savitri called out loudly to the neighbour woman- "Didi, Didi."

On hearing the call of "Didi, Didi," it was Ratanlal who woke first. He remained silent, because late at night, when women's voices are heard, it is better for women to respond first. If a man answers immediately, it opens the possibility of many allegations. Familiarity, too, plays its part. When a known voice reaches the ear, it is best to

act with the relationship in mind.

Ratanlal was a sensible man, and as soon as he recognised Savitri's voice, he woke his wife and called out loudly- "Hey, Allapurwali, Allapurwali."

In any case, Ratanlal's voice was already heavy, and when he spoke again with added force, Sitli startled awake and cried out- "What is it, what is it?"

In the meantime, Savitri called again- "Didi, Didi?"

Replying, Sitli said- "What are you saying, young woman from Brahmpur?"

Only three days earlier, the two women–the one from Brahmpur and the one from Allapur–had quarrelled so fiercely that they had turned away from each other's courtyards, spitting in opposite directions and vowing never to look toward one another's door or speak again. Both had declared- "I do not need you, nor do you need me."

Yet however much modern thinking in Mithila may seem to have withered, in the villages it still lives on much as it always has. If someone comes to your doorstep, it is your duty to treat them as a guest. Of course, there are times when people form groups and settle scores; that, too, happens. This is a particular trait of village life. But not now. What mattered now was not why the woman from Allapur and the woman from Brahmpur had quarrelled.

Brahmpur, situated in the central part of Madhubani district, is counted among the better villages. The women of this village are ahead in many ways. Just as there is sweetness in their speech, there is also refinement in the way they dress, eat, drink, and manage their households. Yes, it is true they lack a certain closeness to fields and farmlands.

Sitli's speech, however, is not harsh like a crow's call. Yet in

matters of eating, drinking, dressing, and adornment, the women of Allapur do lag behind those of Brahmpur. But when it comes to working the fields and managing cattle and property, the woman of Allapur can be said to outdo others.

Savitri said- “Raghunath’s father has developed pain in his chest, and…”

The moment he heard the word “pain,” Ratanlal spoke at once- “Daughter, you go ahead. I will follow right behind. In the meantime, take out some mustard oil in the courtyard. We’ll chant over the oil, and others will arrive as well. Do not worry at all. Everything will be all right. You have done no wrong to anyone that God should do wrong by you.”

Hearing Ratanlal’s words of reassurance, a wave of calm rose within Savitri’s mind. She said- “Didi, let bygones be bygones. Where there are four utensils together, they are bound to clang against one another.”

Here, to forget everything meant to let go of quarrel and bitterness. In her heart, Sitli accepted the woman from Allapur’s words, realising that needless arguments, which create distance during everyday work, bring harm only to oneself. It was far better to live peacefully as neighbours, sharing and supporting one another through life.

Sitli said- “What fault there was belonged to that day. It has passed. Who abandons someone in times of trouble?”

Even today, within society, this belief remains alive. When a fire breaks out or some calamity descends, people of all castes come together, douse the flames, and stand side by side in hardship. In such moments, where are notions of untouchability, discrimination, or high and low? Yet this does not mean untouchability has vanished from society altogether. It still exists, and people continue to encourage distinctions of many kinds.

When Ratanlal reached Gyanachan, he spoke to Savitri like a seasoned physician- “I will use whatever sense and understanding I have, but you should not sit idle either. Send someone to fetch Radhababu as well. Radhababu is an experienced doctor. Illness has no fixed address. You never know in what form it may enter the body.”

Savitri was inexperienced in the ways of life, and even a small crowd or commotion unsettled her mind. Yet after hearing Ratanlal’s words, her anxiety was not as sharp as before. Sitli followed close behind.

Meanwhile, Ratanlal began to massage oil onto Gyanachan’s chest with the calm assurance of someone who knew what he was doing. The pain eased a little. As it lessened, Gyanachan opened his eyes and said- “Ratan bhai.”

Ratanlal replied- “Yes, what is it, Giyan?”

Hearing her husband speak, such hope stirred within Savitri that she felt his pain would now surely leave him.

Sitli said- “Daughter, do not place blind faith in just this much. There are many successive blows in the world. It is very late at night anyway. Let the morning come, then we will arrange further remedies.”

Gyanachan said- “Brother, what can I say about what happened or how it happened. I was asleep, and even now I cannot understand what took place.”

It often happens this way. Even the gravest diseases enter the body in forms a person can scarcely comprehend. Yes, if a snake bites, or one is burned by fire, or meets with a vehicle accident, such events are visible to the eyes, and every possible effort is made to save oneself. But how the most serious illness slips into the body is rarely understood, especially in the depth of night, while one is asleep.

In society and within families too, it is much the same. Not every problem of society is fully understood by every member of that society or family. And while bodily illness can be examined and identified by those who diagnose disease, illness of the mind is far more difficult to grasp.

While speaking softly and slowly, Ratanlal continued to rub his hand over Gyanachan's chest. Meanwhile, the difficult night, heavy and oppressive, moved forward on its own course and passed its limit. As dawn arrived, the call of crows reached their ears, and suddenly everyone felt that morning had come. With the break of dawn, the arrival of day drew near, and the path to seeing the world opened again.

Sitli said- "Daughter, the night of suffering has passed. Now it is day. Just as there are countless severe diseases, there are also countless healers who know how to cure them. Fix this firmly in your mind. Your husband's illness will surely be driven away."

Hearing Sitli's words, Savitri's mind became as still as water deep within the earth. She said- "Didi, if it were only me, I could become new again and start afresh. But you are not like that. You even raise your grandchildren too, even sell my body to do whatever you say."

Seeing Savitri so absorbed in the current of her family's life, Sitli's heart softened like melting wax. New thoughts of compassion toward Savitri began to arise within her. Sitli said- "Daughter, after all, we are people of a backward land. Everything here is backward. Whatever strength we have to recognise our limits and shape our lives within them, we must not fall short of using it. Just as there are cheats upon cheats in the world, so there are also those who can deceive even God. Not that God is blind or deaf and can be fooled so easily. But we are human beings, children of humanity. We are the finest creatures on this earth, formed of the five elements. We are not

animals, nor the offspring of animals."

What Sitli intended by her words and what Savitri understood within herself were known only to the two of them. In the midst of this, Gyanachan spoke- "I will not live." ❑

4.

Six months and five days have passed since Giyanchan fell ill. His condition is now worse than ever. What his unconscious mind still holds remains unknowable, but Savitri, the neighbors, and the wider community keep returning to one shared thought: this is not just the collapse of Giyanchan's family. Such shattered lives are not uncommon. They exist everywhere, throughout the village and across society.

The longing that once lived in Giyanchan's heart, to educate his son Raghunath according to his ideals, now lies buried deep within him. The decision he and his wife had made six months earlier, to enroll Raghunath in school, had decayed and disappeared in the haze of his illness. It is difficult to remember clearly now, but there had been discussions between husband and wife about Raghunath's age, and that in six months, he would be ready to begin school. But those six months have come and gone, and Raghunath has already passed the threshold of his fifth year. Who was there to notice this passing? And who, really, was left to care?

Raghunath's innocent mind had heard the promise directly from his father's lips, that his name would be written in the school register the very next day. But in the shadow of his father's illness, that promise vanished so completely that he forgot when, or even if, it had ever been made.

Now, after six months, Savitri's financial and emotional strength has withered. Her body has grown frail and worn. Mentally drained, she feels her hope for her own life slipping away. Yet whenever she looks at her son Raghunath, the child of her womb, she

pushes down her own suffering and lets her thoughts drift toward his future.

Giyanchan lay quietly in the eastern room of the house. Savitri sat leaning against the third post of the veranda, silently gazing into the distance, her mind fixed on the bleakness of her future. She saw clearly that there was no hope left for her husband. When she had entered this household as a bride, it had been a family of four. After the birth of their first child, they became five. Then, after the death of Giyanchan's elderly parents, they were reduced to three. Now that they were four again, it seemed they would soon return to being three. A sharp ache rose in her chest.

How old was she herself? Next year, she would complete twenty-four years.

Suddenly, Savitri's thoughts turned inward, drawing her into the world of her own womanhood. Once there, she saw clearly how many families like hers existed in society, families without a man at their center. Her mind moved quickly through thoughts of the rise and fall of such homes. The more she thought, the more she realized that society had become more degraded than even a brothel. Living within such a predatory world was not a story easily told. But how one was to live and endure, that was not something society would arrange. Where society lacks the strength to face such forces, the burden of survival falls upon the individual.

Savitri's mind grew tired. She pushed back against her exhaustion with her own resolve and told herself- "Raghunath is five years old now. He is not merely growing day by day. He has already become a companion who walks beside me. However degraded society may have become, it would be wrong to say that the values of Mithila have been completely erased. Even today, there are still people in this world who spend every last ounce of their strength to uphold the values of human duty."

Suddenly, her thoughts turned back to her husband. Though

his body lay still, Giyanchan was counting his final breaths. Lifting the cloth from his face, Savitri looked at him closely. Seeing his altered features, a save rose in the lake of her heart. Just as life becomes unbearable when sudden darkness falls outside the safety of one's shelter, so it felt now. She recalled the long and painful story of the past six months. During that time, she had not once slept a full night, nor eaten a full meal. Within the limits of her understanding and capacity, she had done all that she could. Then why was fate unfolding in this way?

She had sold all the trees standing on her bigha of orchard land to pay for her husband's treatment. In addition, she had sold the jewellery given to her by her parents, ornaments once crafted for her own body. Of the cultivated land they had owned, more than half had gone under mortgage, and what little remained was now being leased out.

When Savitri looked at her family through the lens of money, she realised that although they had become financially broken, it was not true that they lacked the strength to rise again. That strength still remained. All at once, her weary mind awakened.

From within her hollowed thoughts, the image of her life rose clearly before her. She belonged to a society built upon the foundation of family, and when that family began to collapse, the one who remained alive had to rise for the sake of society itself. In her mind, a pure and steady light appeared, as clear as the moon on Saun Panchami. But just as dark clouds suddenly surged in from the strong storms and captured the moon like a thief, casting darkness in every direction, that light vanished from her thoughts. As the shadows spread, her mind trembled.

The tremor came from the thought that, in a society where a woman without a husband is seen as inauspicious and is treated as a bearer of misfortune on roads and at crossings, she herself would soon have to live under that shadow. If her presence or even her

shadow happened to fall upon someone, and that person were to later meet with misfortune, she would be held entirely responsible, forced to endure curses and scorn. Yet within her fractured mind, a thin, pale thread of hope flickered. As it appeared, her heart was once again softened by its quiet light.

Unbidden, a thought rose in Savitri's mind. If a society cannot do good for someone, does it then have the right to do harm? Whether this awakening came from her age or from a mind wounded by pain, it stirred within her all the same. Poor and inexperienced, Savitri did not yet know that the history of humankind–at least as it had unfolded around her–had rarely allowed the joy of an independent life to reach ordinary people. Yet it was also not true that such joy had never been attained. Much in life had been achieved, and the effort to achieve more was still alive.

When Savitri turned her gaze toward her own condition, toward her own age, she clearly saw the forms of oppression that still remained in society for women like her, women heading households without men. The lowest forms of treatment not only continued, they had always existed. Just as the amarbel creeper climbs over another tree, gripping its crown and spreading like a canopy without awareness of its own roots, so too is the condition of family and society. Only when family and society begin to grow with life itself as their foundation do they come to understand the essential elements of living. That, however, is not happening. What happens instead is this: people seek initiation before they seek education. Education means learning. Initiation means giving. When one has not learned at all, what is there left to give?

When Savitri looked at the full shape of her family, a light like a firefly flashed in her mind suddenly. As that light rose, her mind spoke to her. The one who has no inherited wealth and who stands in what is considered the most backward position in a family is not

entirely destitute. There are five bighas of land. She does not yet know how to farm it, but the world moves forward by watching and learning. She would learn. As much as she could produce through her own effort, she would produce. What could not be done that way would be managed through other means. If she did not block anyone's path in society, why would anyone block hers? Life exists to be lived. And living itself is a kind of life.

All at once, Savitri's mind returned to the labour of the past six months. As far as she knew, she had turned away from no doctor, healer, faith practitioner, midwife, or exorcist whose name had reached her ears. It was not true that she had failed to stand before one giver of life after another. In the beginning, she had not understood much, but over time, through six months of lived experience, understanding had begun to take shape. Nor could anyone say that she had ignored the voice of society. It was on society's advice that she went from the village doctor to physicians in Patna. It was on their counsel that she approached doctors, healers, devotees, and exorcists alike. If nothing came of their efforts, how could that be considered her fault?

Suddenly, a firmness rose within Savitri's mind, and with it came a sharp clarity. As that clarity awakened, a thought took shape. A human being is not an elephant, fated to devour an entire tree every day. A human is a human, one whose stomach is filled by a modest measure of food. If the body is kept working, why should life not move forward with laughter?

At that moment, from inside the house where Giyanchan lay, a cry was heard. It was the cry of his final breath. Just as a lamp or lantern flares brightly when the oil is nearly spent, so too was the last force of Giyanchan's voice. Hearing it, Savitri rose and went to him. There, she saw that her husband had already grown calm.

Why did it not occur to Savitri then that there are two kinds of

calm? One is the calm of an unconscious mind, a state of unawareness. The other is the calm of a conscious mind, the kind everyone longs for. In every heart, there lives the same wish: that life should move in peace, that the family should live in peace, that the country and the world should be guided by peace. And yet, even with this wish present in every heart, where does peace truly exist? Why is it that most people, most families, and most societies are constantly caught in unrest?

Just as in a field formed from the same soil and watered by the same source, where hundreds of kinds of fruits and flowers are planted, the soil still remains one in colour, the water one in nature, the trees largely similar, yet each fruit and flower carries its own distinct form and fragrance, so too, although human beings share the same outward shape, one person places wealth above all else and grows and prospers through it, while another places ideas above all else and yet does not grow or prosper. Only when, germinate in thoughts will Saptami Durga be sacred offered eyes by the hands of potter.

Startled by her husband's cry, Savitri placed her finger beneath his nose to feel his breath. The movement of Giyanchan's breathing was growing thinner with every moment. Seeing that fragile breath, a desperate hope still rose in Savitri's mind that if anyone could save her husband's life, she was ready even to sell her own body and seek refuge there.

All at once, her mind raced back over the six months she had spent in her husband's service. As those memories passed through her, a thought took shape. Only those who rescue from illness can truly save. For that purpose, she had already given away everything she possessed. Yet even now her mind burned with the belief that if someone could still preserve her husband's life, whatever little remained she would pour out entirely for that cause.

Standing before him, Savitri called out softly- "Raghunath's

father, Raghunath's father."

Even now, she held on to the hope that though her husband was dying, he would speak at least once in his final moment. When no sound came in reply, Savitri turned back and sat crouched against the veranda post, fixing her gaze on the days ahead and on the world that awaited her. Her thoughts returned to the service she had rendered to her husband. She had gone from one doctor to another in search of refuge, yet none had become his protector.

Why did it not occur to the inexperienced Savitri that, in the present age, medical science has advanced greatly and continues to progress day by day, always working in favour of life? Twenty or twenty-five years earlier, however, the situation had not been the same. When science itself was underdeveloped, medical science too remained limited, and its effectiveness was correspondingly small. Yet illness is illness. It exists without barrier or boundary. There is no fixed rule that determines which disease will enter whose body.

All at once, Savitri's thoughts moved beyond doctors and turned toward exorcists, healers, and faith practitioners. As soon as she entered that realm of memory, she recalled the dhaim from Bariyarba, a nearby village. He was a man without wisdom, yet one who claimed to possess powerful breath. With what shameless confidence he had taken upon himself the burden of disease, declaring that if fusan's divine words of the possessed failed, then three spittle-soaked insults and twenty-five blows of shoes should be hurled at his name. Where had he gone now? Into which hole had he vanished? It was his very performance that had caused Savitri to lose two mango trees. Had she been alive today, she would have faced at least two months of reproach and reckoning.

Slowly binding her broken heart, Savitri tried to find contentment. As that contentment stirred, unbidden thoughts of her own life and the lives of her two children rose within her. With this

awakening came the realisation that everyone knows the body is a house of illness and disorder. There is no certainty about when, or which, disease will enter it. Yet one certainty still had to be established. How is life to be carried across the midstream?

Without warning, another thought arose in Savitri's mind. Just as a student, after appearing in an annual examination that decides promotion to the next class, begins to nurture hope of success and prepares for the future by seeking guidance from fellow students, while another student who foresees failure either resolves to study again or abandons education altogether and turns toward a different path, so too had her own situation taken shape. Should she herself die along with her husband? And if she were to die, what would become of the two children born of her womb?

Savitri's mind was unsettled, and so no clear thought could take form. Instead, her mind began to speak inwardly. Was she the only one on this earth, or were there not countless others like her? Each of them carried their own experiences of life. Patience began to rise within her. It rose with the thought that when one has fallen into such dense darkness of calamity, why not collect oneself like a seasoned cook and prepare for the road ahead?

This had not begun only today. It had happened before and continues to happen even now. When something cannot be understood alone, one asks others. That is one side of it. But the other side is this: the person who shows the way may point toward either a good path or a bad one. For there is also this flaw in human judgement, that when asked for advice on matters they do not understand, people often respond anyway, staining their own conscience in the process. Sometimes, advice is given without any understanding at all.

Savitri's thoughts began to shift. They changed with the realisation that she still possessed one certain wealth: life itself. As

long as she lived, she could shape her life according to her will, just like anyone else. She was alive, for now. Her life companion was leaving her, but was companionship so rare in this world that she would never find any again?

This must not be misunderstood. As a husband, as a companion, as a source of creation, is there truly only one path? There are many paths.

It was as if Savitri had glimpsed the shadow of her own life's road. Her heart grew light. Rising from the veranda, she looked up at the sky and sensed that dawn was breaking. At that moment, she heard the call of a pigeon from the eastern mango tree. Hearing the sound, Savitri made up her mind to go to Vicharchan's home.

Giyanchan and Vicharchan were neighbours and also the same age. Since childhood, a bond of boyhood had existed between them. Yet, in shouldering the responsibilities of their respective families, both had become so occupied that they never found the time to speak of what truly lay within their hearts. The reason such intimate conversations faded was simple. In their early years, they lived close to one another and freely shared their thoughts and feelings. Later, this closeness disappeared. At most, if they happened to meet along a path or at a crossroads, their exchange was limited to a polite greeting- "Brother, are you well?"

"Yes. And are you?"

"Yes."

Behind that simple "yes," vast and unspoken thoughts lay hidden, but neither Giyanchan's nor Vicharchan's mind ever reached those depths. In ordinary terms, what prevailed now was a habit of staying on the surface.

What kind of relationship existed between Giyanchan and Vicharchan was not something Savitri fully understood. Yet what she had seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears was this:

they addressed each other as brothers. Once a bond of brotherhood had been established between them, her own role naturally became that of a sister-in-law. And now, it was to him that she would go, as the wife of his friend, as the wife of his brother.

Savitri set out for Vicharchan's house. As she stepped into the courtyard, her thoughts reached him even before her feet did. But when her mind arrived there, it hesitated. It hesitated because, though there had once been a deep bond of brotherhood and friendship between the two men, her own relationship with Vicharchan had never truly taken shape. Between women, friendship and sisterhood can grow naturally. But here, that was not the case. Here, when a man's friendship with another man is broken by death, what remains is a relationship between a man and a woman. In such a space, how could friendship or sisterhood ever arise?

As she moved from the courtyard path onto the main road, Savitri's thoughts shifted. That shift came with a realisation: if a life companion can be separated forever, if even God can turn away, then why should it be impossible to find another companion in this world, perhaps someone older, someone willing to share a fragment of one's life?

In that moment, it was as though Savitri discovered a clear direction for her life. That direction was this: just as one becomes cautious after stumbling, careful not to strike the same stone again, Savitri adjusted the course of her life and moved forward with awareness.

Seeing Savitri at his door so early in the morning, Vicharchan's heart trembled. As a neighbour and a close companion, he had been following Giyanchan's condition closely. But now, seeing Savitri standing silently before him, his thoughts scattered so completely that no words came to his mouth. On one side stood the fragile state of his childhood friend's family. On the other stood Savitri, youthful and alive in the full bloom of her age. And before him also stood the lives

of the two children. All of it together made Vicharchan's heart tighten with conflict.

Savitri remained silent. She knew that whether she would be offered shelter or turned away, the answer would have to come from him.

Like a maddened elephant, Vicharchan's thoughts thrashed within him, yet still no words formed on his lips. Giyanchan was now in a state where he was neither fully alive nor completely gone. Six months of illness had broken him, nerve by nerve. Now, he could no longer rise. That meant someone else would have to stand for the family. And that someone could only be Savitri.

But society is so that swings on the two weak branches of a tree, blocking both paths ahead. On one side, a widowed woman is seen as inauspicious. On the other, the violence inflicted upon women is no secret. Yet when Savitri came to his doorstep carrying her pain, Vicharchan could not ignore the strength that still remained within her, or within himself.

Gathering strength in his heart, Vicharchan spoke.

"Just as Giyanchan is my companion as your husband too there exists some divine force where human strength falls short. But human life is not meant to end there. It is something one must still cross."

Hearing Vicharchan's grave words, a quiet firmness awakened within Savitri. As that firmness took hold, she looked at the moment before her and asked- "What should I do now?"

Hearing those words from Savitri's lips, Vicharchan's heart hesitated. The reason was clear. Everyone knows this is a world governed by men, where what one does determines what one receives. But Savitri's present moment no longer fit into that rule. Now, even before her husband's dead body had been carried away, she needed to find space to breathe. Her children had hands and feet; in time, they would grow and find their path. Vicharchan said-

“Speak without fear. As long as your husband could walk and speak, you lived by society’s sense of shame and restraint. But now, as the guardian of your family, you must reshape your thinking. Whatever thoughts arise within you, only what is needed in the moment can truly be fulfilled.”

Listening to Vicharchan, Savitri felt a flash in her mind, like a stroke of lightning. For an instant, she saw her own family reflected among countless others across the world. But just as lightning disappears in a blink, so too did that clarity fade. Still, Vicharchan had spoken with awareness. A human being has no fixed shelter, and a woman even less so. The habit of dependence that has been ingrained within her often keeps her thoughts hesitant and tangled, making it difficult to speak openly. So why not begin by glancing at the outline of her life, by looking in the direction of the future?

In the meantime, Savitri said- “The relationship that has existed between our two families until now, let that remain as it is. That is all…”

Just as someone like as someone cook offering siddha rise after shorting through Tamma’s mouth before on the fire, on the fire, Savitri too covered the head of her thoughts as she spoke. Yet within her heart lived the belief that friendship alone often helps one cross even the river of hell.

Vicharchan read the inner structure of Savitri’s thoughts. And reading it, a firm resolve stirred within him. A woman often speaks with her thoughts veiled in this way, but a man, being a man, can speak plainly. By manhood is meant the presence of inner strength. It is not determined by gender but by clarity of thought. Just as courage awakens in some men, so too does it awaken in some women. Yet because of the culture of dependence passed down through generations, a woman’s thinking often carries a certain limitation.

There is, however, another side to this. In the society that has existed until now, the distance that has grown between families has, on one hand, increased desire in men toward women, while on the other, society bares its teeth and shrinks away from confronting this truth. Even so, it cannot be said that the situation is entirely justified or right.

From the beginning, there have always been people–and still are–who raise both hands and try to pull those sinking into a hellish current back to the surface. Yet the current itself often moves with such chameleon-like cunning that it continues to shatter the mind. Because of this, cracks appear within families and within society that are difficult to grasp all at once.

Raising both his hands, Vicharchan said- “Giyanchan may be leaving this world, but you are a part of him. Just as I have always regarded Giyanchan as a companion since childhood, in the same way, I regard you too.”

Hearing Vicharchan’s words, a tender sprout of patience rose within Savitri’s heart. As that sprout emerged, the hope she had held until now for sustaining her family–the question of economic survival–suddenly flashed sharply in her mind. Revealing the helplessness of her startled thoughts, Savitri said- “I do not even know how to work the fields. Then how...?”

Coming to a decisive moment, Vicharchan replied- “The life you wish to hold and move forward with will not be easy. First, carry the heavy burden that lies upon your head right now.”

Still caught in darkness, unable to see clearly, Savitri said- “I cannot even understand the basic means of running a household, and yet I must move ahead. How is that possible?”

With steady confidence, Vicharchan encouraged her to awaken a sense of action within herself and said- “You move forward. I am

right behind you. Once you face what lies directly ahead, the thoughts that follow will be far more useful. So do not harbour even the slightest doubt."

Before Savitri could return to her home, Giyanchan's life had already slipped away. ❑

5.

Like the night of the new moon in the month of Chaitra, a dense darkness spread through Savitri's mind. On the ground of life, she could not summon the courage to take even a single step forward. Yet time is time. When it arrives and stands before you, something must be done. Whether one yields in defeat or is simply worn down by sorrow, something still must be done.

At that moment, Vicharchan arrived. Seeing him, Savitri felt as though the sacred pot of Chaiti Durga had been placed within her heart. Even so, Vicharchan had already accepted that Giyanchan's life had finally slipped away. Savitri was not wailing aloud. There was no one to whom she could cry. Society often turns its face away. Yet the pain and anguish of separation from her husband burned so deeply within her that no calm or comfort could contain it. Tears flowed steadily from her eyes, and a dull ache continued to rise in her heart.

Thoughtful and composed, Vicharchan seemed to suddenly smother the fire of Savitri's grief as he said- "Look, lamenting and collapsing will change nothing. The truth of life is this. Whoever is born on this earth must die. The only uncertainty lies in when. What was destined has happened."

As he spoke, the intensity of Vicharchan's thoughts seemed to rise so high that he might have poured out the reflections of an entire lifetime, filled with action and consequence. Yet within himself, he knew this much: when one plants a mango tree, its sweetness cannot be tasted right away. One simply accepts that once the sapling is placed in the earth, the time for its flowering and fruiting will come

when it must.

Slowly, like ripples settling on the surface of a pond, Vicharchan's words began to steady Savitri's mind. As her thoughts calmed, another reflection rose to the surface. It has long been a custom in society to remove the mortal body from the house as quickly as possible. In today's circumstances, however, this very custom has begun to seem out of step with social realities. When life was rooted in agriculture, families tended to remain close together, and such customs were practical. But today, things have changed. After the death of parents, it is often the son who must perform the final rites, and the son may be employed in a distant land. In such cases, many obstacles arise. Leave must be taken from work, and travel takes long hours. For this reason, it has become necessary to preserve the mortal body in ice.

Wiping the steady stream of tears from her eyes with the edge of her sari, Savitri lifted her gaze to Vicharchan and asked- "What should I do now?"

Hearing her words, Vicharchan replied- "For now, do not look ahead or behind. First, go around the neighbourhood and inform them that the body is to be cremated. We will think about what comes after that. I will take care of the shop arrangements. That is, I will bring the new clothes."

Listening to Vicharchan, Savitri's heart trembled. It trembled at the thought of how she would speak to society, with what face she would do so. And here lay the meaning of that face. The moment Giyanchan's life left his body, Savitri's life as a widow had begun. How does a widow announce to society the cremation of her husband's body?

Seeing her hesitate, Vicharchan spoke again,

"Whatever needs to be done now, do it step by step. When each action moves forward in order, the crossing is eventually reached."

Revealing her helplessness, Savitri said- "There are only the two of us right now. So first, let us take the body out of the house and place it near the tulsi platform."

Vicharchan's mind reached Savitri's earnest thought, and he immediately accepted that she was right.

"You are right to remind me," he said. "You take care of the courtyard, and I will handle everything that needs to be done outside."

Together, they lifted Giyanchan from the bed inside the house and laid him near the tulsi platform in the courtyard, his head facing north. Two incense sticks were lit and planted into the earth before his head.

Five-year-old Raghunath and two-year-old Radha were also in the courtyard. With the quiet understanding of a child, Raghunath sat watching everything. Little Radha, still unaware, stared on in silence.

After placing Giyanchan near the tulsi platform and stepping out of the courtyard, a thought came to Vicharchan. It would be better to prepare everything in advance before taking the body to the grove. From cutting bamboo to arranging the binding of the bier, all would have to be made ready. The matter of clothing could be handled later, once the bier was prepared.

As he walked, Vicharchan went from house to house, informing people that Giyanchan had passed away and asking them to be present.

Even now, this custom remains alive in society: that during the process of cremation, whether invited or uninvited, people come together and stand as one.

After walking some distance, another thought came to Vicharchan. Fuel would also be needed for the cremation. All at once, his mind turned to electricity. In places where electricity is available, cremation is done using electric power. But such a facility does not

exist in the village. It is true that electricity has reached the village now, yet it has only met the needs of simple lamps. It runs a fan or two. Electricity is a force that can bring power into life itself, but in that sense, it has not yet arrived here.

Descending from the city and market back into the reality of village life, Vicharchan began to think. All the mango trees that Giyanchan had once owned had been sold during the course of his illness. Even if a few uncut trees remained, they would not be enough for a cremation. His thoughts began to wander through the many ways society has devised to burn a body.

There are still several practices in use. Those who have the means cremate with sandalwood. Those who do not, but can manage mango wood, use that. Those who can afford neither use dried jute stalks, reeds, or thatch. Those who have nothing at all bury the body in the earth. And if a flowing river is nearby, some consign the body to the current. So many customs, so many methods, yet all meant for the same final act.

But the problem now standing before Savitri had a single core. In recent times, a new practice has entered village society, cremation using cow dung cakes. When his thoughts reached this point, a quiet sense of relief surfaced in Vicharchan's mind. The reason was simple. Even now, in village life, cow dung remains the cheapest fuel available. And what is cheap becomes accessible.

From the question of fuel, his thoughts moved to the matter of who would light the pyre. As soon as he reached the thought of the first flame, countless examples from society passed through his mind. Even children of three or four years old are sometimes made to perform the last rites.

From death to the shraddh rituals, thirteen days are counted. Yet even within these rites, customs and variations differ across communities. In some castes, the mourning period lasts thirteen days.

In others, it extends to fifteen. In some, it continues until the full moon, lasting thirty days. The complication grows further if another death occurs within the family during that same month, or if disputes arise among relatives. Then the rites may extend for yet another month.

Shaking these scattered thoughts from his mind, Vicharchan's focus finally settled on the thirteen-day ritual.

His thoughts paused there for a moment, then moved on again, reminding him that even the thirteen-day death rites exist in many forms. Some perform Vrishau karma, others observe Panchdaan karma. Some follow simple rituals, while others do not perform them at all. It occurred to Vicharchan that if this were his own family's affair, he might have adjusted the rituals according to his own judgement. But to interfere in another household's matters would only introduce unnecessary complications. It would be wiser, then, to consult five respected members of the community and proceed accordingly. After all, it is said that when five come together, there is no shame in either defeat or success.

As he reflected on the thirteen-day rites, Vicharchan began to quietly sort things out in his own mind. What exactly are the steps involved during those thirteen days? Now that poor Savitri, as a trusting companion, had placed her entire burden on him, it would not be right for him to become the cause of any disruption in the rituals. For the moment an obstacle arose, society would turn its judgment upon Savitri, branding her as an ignorant and helpless woman. And those who love to talk would quickly wash their hands of responsibility, pouring their scorn on him instead, even spitting words into his face.

The very thought of such humiliation deepened Vicharchan's concern. Just as a tree carries the story of its life from birth to death within its rings, so too does society carry its entire history in its

womb.

All at once, Vicharchan's thoughts raced across the past twenty to twenty-five years of his life. Twenty-five stood for the count of birthdays, twenty for the arrival of understanding. How does the birth of a child take place? Even though the event involves only a few within the family, everyone knows that the moment labour pains begin, family members begin rushing about, whether it is villagers preparing traditional arrangements or townspeople hurrying to the hospital.

But this was not a time to think of birth. This was a time to think of death. And so, it was only right to focus on the processes of death.

In the midst of these thoughts, Vicharchan arrived at the cloth shop. As he stepped inside, his mind hesitated once more. The hesitation came from a familiar feeling, shopkeepers are often viewed as the lowest sort of people. This is not to suggest that the one who produces goods is inherently noble while the one who trades them is base. Still, his own conscience reminded him that, when it comes to the price of a shroud, honesty is not always upheld with care. Even so, a certain thread of integrity has endured since the days when even shrouds began to be stolen.

When Vicharchan placed his request for cloth intended for funeral rites before the shopkeeper, the man, drawing from experience, selected the cloth and stated its price without delay.

Taking the shroud, Vicharchan stepped away from the shop, and the thought of Giyanchan's final rites struck him once again like a blow. In the family, there were only two individuals who could perform the final rite: Savitri, as the wife, and Raghunath, as the son. But Raghunath was still a child. He would pass through the thirteen days playing, without fully understanding what had happened. Savitri, however, could not afford such distance. Yet if she were to

light the first flame, the family would lose even the symbolic figure of its head.

In any case, both birth and death bring an excess of work into a household. And in Giyanchan's family, there was no other adult to take on that role. It seemed best, then, for Raghunath to give the first flame.

When Vicharchan returned to Giyanchan's house, he saw that, just as a sugar mill moves from cane to sugar in a series of steps, so too were all the cremation arrangements progressing at once. Someone was splitting logs. Another was cutting and shaping bamboo. One person was preparing planks and supports. Someone had gone to the potter to fetch vessels. Another had taken a cart to collect cow dung cakes.

If the cakes were small, two hundred would suffice. If they were larger, one hundred–or a little more–would do. All could be brought on a single cart. And because cow dung was a reliable fuel, there was no need to mix in straw or husk, as is done with firewood. One only had to arrange the pyre, place the body at its center, light the flame, and return.

Reaching the doorway, Vicharchan called out to Chetnath- "Chetu bhai, have a look at the cloth."

Just as a charmer does not always have his spell ready, Chetnath too did not possess exact knowledge about shroud cloth. Yet he carefully examined everything, from the covering for the body to the garments required by the performer of the rites, including the cloth to be worn around the neck. He knew well what the performer must wear, and without delay, he began measuring and preparing the necessary garments.

After reviewing all the cremation arrangements, Vicharchan returned to the courtyard and informed Savitri of everything. He then asked- "The preparations outside are complete. What is the situation

in the courtyard?"

Hearing his words, Savitri lifted her eyes, looked once, then lowered them again and replied- "The courtyard will be ready only when the outside is."

Savitri did not carry within her the kind of grief over her husband's death that others often do. Yet it would also be untrue to say that her sorrow was small. It was there. By "others" is meant those whose husbands die suddenly, in accidents. Savitri's experience had been different. She had stood firmly on the field of death for six continuous months. And as the nearness of her husband's death slowly revealed itself, her awareness of the burden she would have to carry began to awaken.

As the emptiness created by his fading presence deepened over those six months, Savitri had slowly begun to fill that space herself. In this way, the hope of continuing life had already begun to take root in her mind.

There had been moments of crisis too, times when her husband had turned completely away from hope. The certainty of his death had already taken firm hold in her heart. Gradually, through the rhythm of daily action, another realisation began to shape itself in her mind: even without her husband's physical presence, she could still keep her family alive and moving forward.

Yet there were also times when, unable to bear her husband's suffering, she would cry out aloud, asking where death was hiding, and why it did not come and take him away.

Today, Savitri stood at the edge of two boundaries of life. As much joy stirred within her as poison mingled with it. Her mind stood at the confluence of these two opposing currents.

Watching all the arrangements come together, with one task naturally inviting the next, similar thoughts began to rise in Vicharchan's mind. He felt an urge to speak directly to Savitri and

suggest that it would be better for the final rite to be performed by her son. His reasoning was clear. Raghunath was still a child; for him, the rites would not interfere with the family's daily functioning. But if Savitri were to give the first flame, the entire weight of the household would fall upon her shoulders at once. This would disrupt many essential tasks, and the completion of the prescribed rites would take much longer.

Yet almost immediately, another thought restrained him. Society was present at the doorway. It would be wiser to place the matter before everyone and arrive at a collective decision. When five people come together to deliberate, five different strands of life's experience also enter the conversation. What suits the present time, and what has become outdated or unsuitable, that resolution must come from society itself.

As soon as his gaze turned towards the presence of society, Vicharchan became aware that from this moment onward, both faces of death rituals, those governed by quiet restraint and those driven by ostentatious display, would inevitably stand side by side.

Why not then tell Savitri directly that, as soon as the body leaves the courtyard, all impure household items must be removed and discarded? The courtyard and house would need to be swept, washed, and ritually cleansed. Within the next thirteen days, all thirteen prescribed rites would need to be performed, and the householder would be expected to observe each one.

On one side, the family had lost its sole earning member. On the other, whatever fields remained would likely have to be sold or mortgaged to meet the demands of ritual expenses.

Vicharchan checked his thoughts. He stopped himself. This was not a matter of personal opinion; it was a collective concern. At best, one could present one's considered thoughts before the group. If the community chose to uphold an improper practice and assert its

authority over it, no single person could stop them. Still, one could always express support for what was proper and necessary.

Abruptly, Vicharchan brought his focus back to the task at hand. As Savitri stepped out of the courtyard, he said- “Just as you’ve prepared everything inside the courtyard, I’m looking after the preparations at the gate or outside.”

When Vicharchan reached the doorway, Phuchna, who was tying together firewood bundles, spoke up- “Vicharchan Chacha, have arrangements been made yet for the kirtan and bhajan?”

Jeevach rebuked him sharply- “Hey Phuchna, don’t you even understand what kind of death this is?”

Phuchna fell silent, stunned. He said nothing more.

Three days later, the work at the cremation ground was completed amid ashes and embers. While the scriptural observances would continue, the physical processes were now finished. If any part of the body had remained unburnt in the fire, it had been buried in the earth. There is also the tradition in certain communities to bury bodies without cremation, where burning is not permitted and burial is the prescribed rite.

Vicharchan reflected that when Giyanchan’s wife had already borne such heavy responsibility, failing to stay alert to the accumulation of work could easily lead to delays that ran counter to time itself. And once a task fell behind schedule, it risked losing its meaning altogether. With this in mind, around two in the afternoon, under the harsh heat of the day, Vicharchan decided to go to Giyanchan’s house again. It was the right moment to inform the family of the tasks that still needed to be completed that day.

As he stepped away from his own home and onto the road, a thought arose in Vicharchan’s mind: why not involve at least one experienced person in the discussion? It is often said that even a single learned Vedic scholar is more valuable than many untrained

voices.

As his gaze turned toward the experienced members of the community, another thought followed. Among capable and respected men, it would be wise to involve someone from the same locality. After all, people living in the same settlement often share similar customs, even if some differences arise from local or regional traditions.

Before going to Giyanchan's house, Vicharchan made his way to Devan's place.

Devan was sitting at the door. The moment he saw Vicharchan, he said- "Vicharchan, one part of the ritual has already been completed at Giyanchan's."

Without thinking ahead or back, Vicharchan simply replied- "Yes."

Hearing this, Devan said- "But isn't there still another rite left to be done today?"

The moment the word "left" fell from Devan's lips, it was as if Vicharchan's heart gave a sudden jolt. What struck him was that the daytime work–the act of sealing everything–had indeed been completed. But the thirteenth-day feast, meant for those who had accompanied the body to take part in the burning rites, was still pending. That would take place at night.

Vicharchan said- "Brother Devan, the daytime work is done, but the night ritual is still left."

In any case, Vicharchan also knew that those who accompany the body to the cremation ground and take part in the burning rites are traditionally given the thirteenth-day feast as a form of recompense, which is considered appropriate. After all, the cremation itself takes more than three hours, almost a full watch, amounting to close to four hours of labor. In return, the practice of the thirteenth-day meal has come into being.

Even otherwise, once all bodily rites are completed, some people are also assisted in washing their hands and cleansing themselves.

Feigning ignorance, Vicharchan asked- “What exactly is still left, brother?”

As if drawing a curtain over Vicharchan’s unsettled thoughts, Devan replied- “Vicharchan, it is true that the daily rituals surrounding death are more or less the same everywhere. But the differences that exist between one society and another, and even between castes within the same society, are facts people often forget. It seems you too have overlooked that today.”

Recognizing the fault in his own forgetfulness, Vicharchan said- “Yes, brother, you are right. How could one not forget? When caught in the web of family entanglements, is there even a single moment of peace left for devotion to God, for participating in collective rites and observances? In such times, it is only by the grace of people like you that life somehow carries on.”

Acknowledging the recognition of his stature, Devan said- “Vicharchan, it would be better if we go to Giyanchan’s house. Whatever discussion takes place there will also be heard by the women of the household. They will follow what seems right to them and refrain from what feels inappropriate.”

Listening to Devan, Vicharchan too felt that this would indeed be better.

Both Devan and Vicharchan arrived at Giyanchan’s house in a composed and willing state of mind. With a gesture, Savitri was asked to keep the noise down, and the two men sat nearby.

As soon as they were seated, Vicharchan spoke,

“The first rite after death will be completed today itself. Just as the work at the cremation ground concluded with the sealing of the ashes, the household duties can also be completed by offering proper

recompense to those who carried the bier."

In order to gauge Savitri's thoughts, Vicharchan held back and did not speak further. In truth, Savitri herself felt that what had happened could not be undone. People are judged by their actions, and society responds accordingly. Yet within society, many obligations remain. These begin with ten days of abstention from bathing and grooming, during which society must still be fed. Then, on the eleventh day, the first shraddha ritual takes place, extending from the courtyard to the pond's steps. Again, society is fed. These rites continue until the final shraddha ceremony is completed.

Just as Vicharchan was trying to interpret Savitri's unspoken feelings, she herself spoke, keeping society's expectations in mind- "These are matters for the men to decide. If something happens to us, I remain women after all. The responsibility to act lies with the men. Whatever you advise, I will follow it as far as I can. If it becomes impossible, I will simply fold my hands and say that even a single pot of water, if offered, brings deliverance."

Hearing her words, Devan was left speechless, and Vicharchan was equally shaken. Devan stayed silent because Vicharchan was regarded as the principal decision-maker, and it was only proper that he speak first. Yet as Devan waited for Vicharchan to express his view, Vicharchan too began to look toward Devan, thinking that, as the elder and more experienced one, it was Devan whose words ought to be accepted. If anyone could be called upon to interpret and express society's customs, it would naturally be Devan. After all, he had already passed the age of sixty. Though he might appear simple, even blunt, no one could say he lacked the capacity to become a thinker of substance, if not a sage of the Vedic order like Charvaka.

Seeking to prompt him, Vicharchan said- "Brother Devan, everyone has always called you brother, and so do I. But you are now of a father's age, and surely your thoughts carry the weight of

tradition."

Hearing this, Devan's own thoughts stirred. He felt that society contained both genuine customs and harmful practices disguised as tradition. So why not speak plainly and help clear away the confusion? Devan said- "Son Vichar, there are communities where, after death, the body is thrown into the Ganges. In doing so, they turn the impure into the pure and the pure into the impure, all for their own benefit. That same kind of thinking exists even within our own villages and communities."

Savitri felt a quiet relief in her heart, sensing that Devan uncle was giving voice to what she herself had been feeling. Yet she knew that society was not the kind to abandon the rites for the departed merely by selling household goods. Even in today's changing world, where people may earn money elsewhere and arrange grand feasts, they still understand what is right and what is not.

Offering her thoughts, Savitri said- "Whatever the two of you decide after reflection, I will follow."

Vicharchan said- "We shall think it over again during the ten days. The meal arranged today is a form of recompense for those who have labored. Let us settle today's matters today. What comes next will be understood in time."

Savitri replied- "In such haste, how will the curd be set? The buffalo will be milked only in the evening. And if we use milk instead of curd, how will the food stay on leaf plates? Everything will just run off." ❑

6.

Today is the ninth day, that is, the ninth day since Giyanchan's death. The time for tomorrow's ritual bathing and grooming has already been assigned to Giyanchan's wife. The extensive rites of the thirteenth-day shraddha will begin the day after tomorrow.

Upon arriving, Devan's mind became caught in the kind of entanglement one feels at a three-way crossroads. On one side stood the clear duties of his own life. On the other was the question of how to offer Savitri a way out of a problem that had become a trap within a trap.

The trap was this: society is divided into sects. Some say they are Hindu, others say Muslim. Some call themselves Christian, others Jewish or Parsi. This is only the outer layer of division. Beneath it, even among Hindus, there exist countless castes and codes of conduct. The same is true of other religious communities. Going deeper, even within a single caste, there are further subdivisions. Between these, such distances in behavior have been created that people neither intermarry nor sit together to eat at funeral or wedding feasts. One cannot say whether untouchability lies in food and water, or within human beings themselves. When receiving alms and offerings, everyone says that human values should be upheld, yet life tells a different story.

Gradually, Devan's troubled mind began to settle. As peace returns to thought, it enters the heart as well, and the same happened with Devan. As his heart grew calm, his thoughts turned to Savitri's present condition.

How cruel God can be. If Giyanchan was to be taken away in the end, why was he dragged through six long months of lingering

illness? Some ailments pass swiftly, like a sudden sting or bite, no money spent on medicine, no need for care or constant service. But that was not Savitri's fate. For six months, she endured everything: medicines, sleepless nights, and relentless caregiving. In the process, two bighas of land had to be mortgaged, and even a flourishing grove of ten kathas was sold off completely.

And then there are the shameless people in society. Some consider seeing a widow on the road an ill omen. Others view a woman without a man as defenceless and keep a predatory gaze fixed on her.

The deeper Devan's thoughts went in relation to Savitri, the more he began to sweat. Suddenly, his gaze turned inward. Was he not, after all, part of Savitri's society, meaning Giyanchan's society? As a member of that society, did he not at least have the right to think this much: that where Giyanchan's family had fallen and shattered, a boundary ought to be drawn there, a limit fixed, and from that point onward, a rope offered, like drawing a bucket from a well, to lift them up again?

Devan's mind came to a halt. And as it did, it almost laughed at itself. The shraddha rituals, as they exist in today's society, are just such things. And here we are, living in the twenty-first century–capable of dissecting a frog and identifying each of its organs–yet unable to dissect and understand the bindings and restrictions of our own society.

Reining in the runaway reins of thought, Devan found his mind tangled once again in its own reflections.

By chance, at that very moment, Vicharchan arrived at Devan's place. Seeing him, Devan gestured for him to sit beside him. He knew Vicharchan's nature well. Knowing him well meant understanding that just as good thoughts are thought out and bad thoughts are thought out, Vicharchan was someone who understood

those who stood between the two.

As soon as Vicharchan sat down, Devan asked- “Son Vichar, today is the ninth day since Giyanchan’s death. Tomorrow is the day of ritual bathing and grooming.”

Hearing Devan’s words, Vicharchan felt that Devan had somehow understood what he had left unsaid. Letting out a quiet assent, Vicharchan said- “Yes.”

Today marks the final day of the first set of rites after death. From tomorrow, the second stage will begin, meaning the rites that follow ritual bathing and grooming. Recalling the custom that bridges the first and second phases, Devan asked- “Vicharchan, what all did you do on the third day of the first process?”

Like someone who, after completing a task, seeks acknowledgment, Vicharchan responded with a desire to be appreciated- “Brother Devan, from the burning of the body to the sealing of the ashes, and then feeding those who carried the bier late into the night, it became so late that I couldn't even sleep peacefully on a full stomach. In the morning, it felt as if I had only just returned from a task, and my entire body ached.”

Devan, by nature, was sharp-witted. In addition, sixty years of life had made him a touchstone of social understanding. He said- “The sealing of the ashes was done during the day, and the feast was held at night. But after the sealing of the ashes, was the complete ritual offering performed properly, or was it skipped altogether?”

Vicharchan was taken aback by Devan’s question. His confusion stemmed from the fact that, according to the customs of their own caste-based society, there was no established tradition of making offerings at the ash mound. After all, everything eventually returns to dust. Even so, a faint unease stirred in his mind. Could it be that no offering had been made at Giyanchan’s ash mound, and that such lapses had happened before as well?

Gathering himself, Vicharchan said- "It's better to follow whatever customs prevail in society. Among our people, there is no practice of making offerings at the ash mound, so why insist upon it?"

Listening to this, Devan felt a quiet smile rise within him. There was not a trace of error in Vicharchan's reasoning. Yet it was also true that fault was not entirely absent. In a society where the practice of making offerings at the ash mound exists, its absence would certainly be considered a lapse.

Devan also felt, deep in his heart, that Vicharchan–whatever else he might be–was neither naïve nor uninformed. At a time when so much was breaking apart and society was held together only by those shouldering its weight, such individuals could be counted among the few blessings still left.

Gathering his thoughts, Devan said- "Son Vichar, in our place–meaning in our own society–there is neither a single fixed method for cremation nor for the rites that follow."

As he spoke, Devan sensed that Vicharchan had not fully grasped what he meant. There is always a difference between the glow on a face when a thought has been understood and the strained flush when it has not, and Vicharchan's expression revealed just that. Still, nodding uncertainly, Vicharchan asked- "What do you mean, brother?"

Devan replied- "In our society, there are many customs for cremating the dead. Those who can afford it burn the body with sandalwood. Those who cannot manage that use mango wood. Those with even fewer means burn it with straw and leaves. And those who have nothing at all bury the body in the earth. And not only that. In regions beyond the plains, in the riverine tracts, just as there is a custom of burying the dead in the soil, there also exists the practice of consigning the body to the river current itself."

Until now, Vicharchan had understood cremation only in terms of firewood, ranging from logs to dried dung cakes. He was also aware that in certain communities, the dead are buried rather than burned. But hearing Devan speak, his thoughts suddenly moved further ahead. He said- "Brother, let what has already been done remain as it is. If one starts chasing ghosts, they circle back and chase in return. Tomorrow is the tenth day. The next matter to be considered is Savitri's forthcoming duties related to her husband's shraddha. That's why it occurred to me that the two of us should sit together beforehand and talk things through."

Hearing Vicharchan's clear-headed proposal, Devan felt an impulse to praise him openly. Yet he also knew that when people sit together to align their thoughts, it is only meaningful if their face and intent are in harmony. Otherwise, it is well known that even a dog can turn wild within its own territory. One must observe how people in society actually live out their alignments in practice.

As Devan's mind wandered through the forest of forthcoming rites, two thoughts arose within him. One said it would be improper to impose his own views on Vicharchan, because if the person who must act is not inwardly aligned with the idea, the rite itself cannot be properly performed. The other said it would be better to listen first to Vicharchan's thinking and then gently guide his understanding in a sound direction.

Encouraging him, Devan said- "This is wisdom at work, son. Always remember this: before taking a step toward any task, consider how much preparation lies within you and how much must be arranged from outside. If one understands the weight of a task in this way and proceeds with restraint–holding oneself in check like an elephant guided by his goad–then good, not harm, will follow."

Vicharchan, however, did not look upon Devan with such reverence as to see him as a creator or a saint. They could sit together

for an hour or two and discuss everything from family matters to societal concerns, but even that did not always happen. In their own village and community, there were people regarded as wise guides, yet even sitting beside them and shaping one's life accordingly did not truly occur. Each person bore the weight of their own life and its demands, and alongside effort, there were always obstacles.

Devan then asked- "So tell me, son. What kind of matter is this, and what sort of discussion are you proposing?"

Devan's line of thought was not entirely clear to Vicharchan. Still, the task planned for the following day–reflecting on Giyanchan's shraddha rites–continued to flicker in his mind like a seed sprouting in a winter field. Vicharchan said- "Tomorrow is the day of bathing and shaving for Giyanchan's rites, so…"

After uttering "bathing and shaving," Vicharchan fell silent. His thoughts were fixed solely on Savitri's next responsibilities, while Devan's mind was contemplating the broader process of death and its customs in society.

Devan said- "Son Vichar, just as in our society there is not one single way to cremate the dead, but many, in the same way, there is not only one method of performing the subsequent rites, meaning the shraddha. This is the philosophy of life handed down to us by our forefathers."

Hearing no direct mention of Giyanchan's specific rites, Vicharchan asked- "What do you mean by that, brother?"

Just as an elder encourages a younger brother by clearing a path and showing, step by step, how to move forward, Devan patted Vicharchan's back and said- "Son, tomorrow will be the day of bathing and shaving. That is part of the thirteenth-day shraddha process. But there are societies where a half-monthly rite is observed, and for them, bathing and shaving do not extend beyond the tenth day. Similarly, in communities where there is no monthly rite at all,

the bathing and shaving are also limited to that point. Society, in fact, has created a collective path of its own. Death may happen to anyone, but for those who take part in the cremation as bearers, it is considered acceptable whether they shave or not. Even so, there is always a difference between society at large and the bonds of family and kinship."

Gathering his thoughts, Vicharchan said- "Brother, Hari is infinite, and the stories of Hari are infinite as well. There may be unity within Hari, and even without unity, infinity still remains. Just as Valmiki's Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, becomes in Tulsidas the incarnation of the Supreme Divine, and farther still, in Kabir's vision, Rama becomes completely formless and without attributes. Even then, it cannot be said that we truly know Rama. People of the world do not truly know him. Hundreds of original Ramayanas continue to float and surface in the great ocean of the world."

Hearing Vicharchan's thoughts drift toward broader ideas, Devan responded with the patience of a chess player making a careful move. He said- "Son Vichar, this is the world and the play of the world. It's not only the men of each household who understand such things. The women understand them too, and they even say aloud, 'In life there is coarse rice, and in death there is milk and rice.'"

Vicharchan's mind was already adrift, and Devan's words pushed it further still. It was as if a man carrying a bundle of dry firewood on his head were to stumble into deep water, unable to throw off the burden or save himself. Vicharchan felt that same helplessness. Even so, Devan was quietly trying to read the currents of Vicharchan's thoughts.

All at once, it struck Vicharchan that he was getting lost in pointless tides. Since Savitri had already taken up the weight of the task, why not simply align their thoughts as brothers and move forward? At the very least, this much was certain: even if society

were to oppose their decision, the two of them would still stand on the same side.

As his thoughts returned within proper bounds, Vicharchan felt steadier. With that steadiness came the urge to place the larger question before Devan. He said- “Brother, tomorrow marks ten days since my friend, since Giyanchan’s death. From tomorrow onward, which rites are to be performed?”

From the tenth to the thirteenth day, beginning with the bathing and shaving rituals and continuing through the twelfth and thirteenth-day ceremonies, there are many rites in between. Some new practices emerge, while some older ones naturally fade away. Even so, Vicharchan was still only at the beginning. If he simply presented his own view and the other accepted without question, what real exchange of ideas would that be? And without true reflection, if only a superficial agreement was reached, how long could that understanding actually last?

Another thought arose in Devan’s mind. At the very least, Vicharchan must have come with the belief that the meeting of two brothers’ thoughts could itself create a kind of strength within society.

Devan said- “Son Vichar, are we trying to draw up a full map and land record of the whole country today, and then tell Giyanchan’s wife tomorrow to carry out the plan accordingly? Giyanchan may have passed, but his wife and children are still here. So it would be better if the two of us remain present, and she remains as well, and all three of us sit together to consider the next steps.”

Vicharchan found Devan’s reasoning settling well in his mind. Yet, the old habit of quick conclusions made him uneasy, as if today’s thoughts might not be enough to handle tomorrow’s work. He said- “Brother, when matters of death were unfolding, we thought and acted side by side. But that time has passed. Now, the work requires

both men and women to act together. If we do not think things through in advance–among men and women–won't there inevitably be confusion once the work begins?"

Strengthening the thread of his response, Devan replied- "This is not a ledger where a small mistake turns thousands into millions or millions into thousands. We are dealing with the processes of life. Just as they grow little by little, they also diminish little by little. So there is no need to burden the mind."

Hearing Devan's words, it felt to Vicharchan as though a breath of light, of self-belief, had suddenly been kindled within him.❑

7.

With his mind already restless, Vicharchan's sleep broke at four in the morning. The moment he awoke, the thought struck him that it must already be dawn and that he had overslept. His friend Savitri might be waiting on the road. If not that, then at the very least, he ought to go to her first and explain everything about the tasks of the coming day. But what exactly would he say? If he and Devan had sat together the previous evening and thought things through, that would have been different. Instead, Devan had said that one should begin the work and let thought move alongside action. That made it necessary for Devan to be with him as well.

Just then, the early-morning train blew its whistle at the station. Vicharchan knew well that this train travelled eastward. Since it was sounding its whistle now, it meant that dawn had not yet arrived. He rose from the bed and stepped outside, lifting his eyes to the sky. There he saw the Dandi Tarazu rising in the eastern direction.

Vicharchan did not know that the position of the Dandi Tarazu also rises and sets according to the seasons. In some seasons, it rises in the early evening and sinks by midnight, while in others, it rises around midnight and sets by morning. This threw Vicharchan into confusion. One part of his mind insisted that dawn had arrived. Another part argued that since the Dandi Tarazu was only just rising in the east, it must still be evening.

Then he wondered how it could be evening at all. Had they not eaten and drunk well into the night, gone to bed, and slept soundly? How could evening still be lingering? Had his mind become so confused that he was mistaking west for east? But how was he to

resolve this now? In daylight, he could have fixed east and west by watching the sun. Finding one's bearings at night was not so easy. During the day, the sun rises in the east in the morning and sets in the west in the evening, a regular and reliable order. But night is night. With no clear direction in the darkness, Vicharchan closed his eyes, steadied his mind, and reflected that day takes its direction from the sun, while night belongs to the moon. That, perhaps, was how one finds one's way in the dark.

When he opened his eyes and thought it through, understanding dawned. On a full-moon night, the moon rises large and luminous in the east and, by morning, sets in the west in the same full form. What brought this to Vicharchan's mind was the memory of Kartik Purnima, when every year people go to Simariya Ghat to bathe in the Ganga.

This is not the place to recount Simariya as remembered by the nation's renowned poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, nor to compare what Simariya has become today with what it once was in Dinkar's time. How did the Simariya that Dinkar knew as a place of the pen turn into a village of guns? Is there some fault in the soil of the Ganga's banks, or in the images shaped from that very soil?

Even now, people still bring that same riverbank earth, known as gangot, and apply it to their foreheads and arms, remembering the ancestors and seeking their deliverance.

The thought of immersing oneself in the Ganga at Simariya Ghat strengthened Vicharchan's conviction that, like the sun, the moon too rises in the east and sets in the west. Steadying himself, he began to observe the moon more carefully, reminding himself that it was still night. But what he saw unsettled him even more: the moon was rising in the west, shaped like a sickle.

The sight of the sickle-shaped moon disturbed him. His confusion came from the image fixed in his mind of the full moon,

rising and setting like a vast reddish orb. Where had that moon gone today? His mind faltered.

Vicharchan did not understand the principles of geography or astronomy. He did not know that the moon is simply the moon, a celestial body whose rising and setting do not follow a single, rigid rule of east and west. And yet, there is order in both. If there were no order, how could regularity exist?

After the full moon, the moon rises toward the east. After the new moon, it rises toward the west. A clearer sign still is this: after the full moon, the moon gradually thins, moment by moment, until by the time the new moon arrives, it becomes faint and almost disappears. In contrast, the moon that follows the new moon grows steadily fuller, until, as it approaches the next full moon, it swells into a vast reddish sphere that turns the surrounding darkness into light.

Is human life not like the moon as well? On one side, someone is filled with wealth; on another, someone is without it. Just as the flood of Kubera's riches decreases in one place and increases in another, so too does human life unfold, where bitterness diminishes on one side, and fulfilment arises on the other.

Suddenly, a cool current of calm ran through Vicharchan's mind, like a gentle breeze after strain.

And then, a thought arose: just as water, when it changes its form, turns into ice–from liquid to solid–and becomes so firm and strong that it can shape an entire world, so too must there be such a power within human consciousness. Just as the sun illuminates the world, does not the conscious force within a human being carry a similar light?

On one side, an innocent, unknowing child awakens and gradually transforms into a conscious, discerning being. On the other, beneath the moon, the sun, and the stars adorning the sky, the earth too stands adorned with mountains and seas. Yet Vicharchan's

awakened consciousness slipped again at that very point, like a cart slipping into a broken rut on a damaged road.

The reason his conscious mind faltered was this: one world stood plainly before his eyes, made of earth and water, of land and sky. Another world existed within the mind itself. Both were complete in their own way. Then which of the two was the truth, and which was illusion?

Vicharchan's thoughts were still tangled when, just then, a pair of pigeon bird called out from a tree. Hearing the bird's cry, Vicharchan's mind settled. He understood that dawn had arrived. With the recognition of morning, a host of questions and a multitude of tasks rushed into his mind, as if lining up for inspection.

Caught between countless thoughts and duties, Vicharchan felt lost. Lost in the sense that he could no longer tell which task held which guiding thread, which should come first, or which could be set aside. And yet, work is work, just as rule is rule. One task may be worth only a few coins, another may carry the weight of great consequence.

So what was the right course?

At that point, it was as if a deluge poured into Vicharchan's mind, drowning every thought within it. Like bubbles rising from submerged breath, his breathing grew restless. But as his breath slowly steadied, a realisation surfaced: he had been letting his mind wander without purpose.

Gathering himself, Vicharchan began to bind the task of the coming day with focus, just as Krishna was once bound to the mortar, while Savitri, like Yashoda, held the guiding rope in her hands.

The moment his thoughts turned toward Savitri, Vicharchan felt a sharp awareness of his own manhood. With that awareness came the understanding that one's engagement with the world need not extend beyond what one can truly carry forward. Today was the

day of bathing and shaving for Giyanchan. He had already lost the argument with his friend, and now, to fulfil what remained–to see it through despite that loss–was itself the mark of being a man.

Morning had fully arrived. That poor woman's heart must be restless too. She would be sitting with her gaze fixed on her tasks, on the rituals of the day ahead, remembering her husband. Why not first complete his own daily duties, then go to Devan's house, think things through with him, and from there proceed together to the place of action, that is, Savitri's home? Seeing the way ahead begin to level out, Vicharchan's mind too found its balance.

As he finished his daily routine, it occurred to him that it would be good to have some tea. At the very least, it would generate enough energy to keep him working steadily until noon or one o'clock. Even now, Vicharchan had not fully grasped the scale of the task before him, nor the limits of his own strength. If a task is expected to take four hours, one must first cultivate the energy within oneself to carry it properly to its conclusion.

After taking tea and chewing a few betel leaves, Vicharchan looked toward the east and saw the horizon breaking open. The redness of the rising sun was intensifying. All at once, another worry surfaced. If Devan had not yet risen, time would be lost in getting him ready as well.

A conflict stirred within him. With that conflict, Vicharchan came to an abrupt halt. He was already preparing to go to Savitri's place, but if he went first to Devan's house and half an hour–or even an hour–was spent waiting for him, precious time would slip away. In Savitri's eyes, he might even appear at fault for not arriving on time.

At the same time, another thought arose. If he went ahead without Devan, Devan might feel slighted. After all, had they not agreed to think things through together? Why should Vicharchan go

alone and leave him behind?

It became a classic dilemma of the snake and the mole. If he acted one way, there would be a loss. If he acted the other way, there would be loss again.

Steadying himself, Vicharchan decided he would first go to Devan's house. If it seemed Devan would take too long to get ready, he would tell him that he would go ahead for the moment and inform Savitri that Devan would be joining them shortly.

Just as, when conditions align, the vehicle of life gathers momentum and moves smoothly, the same sense of flow settled over Vicharchan's mind.

Devan lived his life with a firm grip, holding it tightly in his own hands, and so he kept time according to his own rhythm. Having completed his daily routine, he had just taken a cup of tea in hand when he saw Vicharchan and said- "Son, I've just taken the tea in hand. There's only one cup. Come, let us two brothers share it."

Vicharchan's mind, however, remained focused on the tasks ahead. He still had betel in his mouth from earlier and hadn't even spat it out once. Spitting it out now, he said- "Brother, I've already eaten and had tea and betel before leaving home, so I'll not take more. This is your morning meal. You should have it."

Hearing this, Devan simply nodded. Without another word, he drank his tea, chewed his betel, and set off with Vicharchan toward Giyanchan's–meaning Savitri's–house. It was only a three- or four-minute walk. Savitri too was standing at the threshold, watching the road for Vicharchan. On seeing her, Vicharchan said- "We have arrived at the appointed time."

Savitri stood silently, responding only with a nod. Even before Vicharchan had arrived, she had already spread out bedding outside the doorway. As they reached the door, Devan said- "There are only three of us. When three people sit together, it doesn't take long to

reach agreement. So we'll arrive at a shared understanding, shape the thread of action, and then move forward accordingly."

Supporting Devan's thought, Vicharchan said- "You've spoken rightly, brother. We see in society how people are pushed down relentlessly, crushed again and again. In such a place, if we move together to save ourselves, that's no child's play. You are experienced, so you will speak from experience. And now that our friend has entrusted us with this burden, doesn't it become our responsibility to help her reach the far shore?"

Vicharchan's words settled into Devan's mind, and they sank just as deeply into Savitri's heart. As a petitioner presents her case–whether in writing or by word of mouth–Savitri spoke with folded resolve- "I am riding in a boat that is sinking in the current of life. It is you who must bring it to the far shore."

Hearing Savitri's words, a thought arose in Devan's mind: he should tell her that each person must reach the far shore through his own effort, and that while a second or third person may sometimes serve as a helper, they can just as easily become an obstacle. But another thought followed quickly. Until now, there had been no direct exchange of views between Devan and Savitri. Vicharchan stood between them. It would be better, then, for Vicharchan to speak, and so he did.

Intervening gently, Vicharchan said- "In this world, everyone reaches their far shore in one way or another, through success or failure. Then why should your crossing not be possible?"

At the mention of the "far shore," a current of relief passed through Savitri's mind. Yet how that crossing would happen still remained unclear to her.

Devan, meanwhile, felt that since Savitri herself was trying to make sense of the burden she carried, it would be right to first share his own life experience. After that, she could reflect and decide for

herself which path suited her best. If she chose a path aligned with his thinking, he would support her from behind as far as he could. If not, then the task would remain hers alone, whether it led to good or ill. No one should later be able to say- “We followed someone else’s advice and that’s why I sank or was ruined.”

By the time this thought settled, Devan’s mind had become still and firm.

In the meantime, Savitri spoke- “How the crossing will happen is something the two of you must think through and tell me. Whatever you decide, I am ready to accept it with closed eyes.”

Hearing Savitri speak with such conviction, Devan’s mind filled with a quiet hope. Yet Vicharchan’s presence stirred another thought in him: whatever Vicharchan’s view might be, only Vicharchan could give voice to it. So Devan lifted his gaze and waited to hear him speak.

Vicharchan’s own mind was already leaning in a certain direction. Just as a river rising from a mountain takes root in that mountain and flows forward as a stream to finally merge with the sea, even if many differently coloured currents join and reshape its course along the way, Devan was like that river.

Vicharchan and Savitri were still young. Their experience of life had not yet fully ripened. Devan, however, was not like them. He was like a lone vine tree growing among hundreds of bighas of mango orchard, spreading its branches and leaves, flowering and fruiting so abundantly that neither crows nor wild creatures could ignore it.

Devan was like that very creeper. He spoke plainly. He had no desire to claim ownership over anyone, nor did he accept being owned by others. Just as God is said to be the master of all, Devan too was master of himself.

Vicharchan said- “Brother, Giyanchan was our companion, and now he is no longer among us. Before us stands his wife, Savitri.

She is young, and so am I. We have not yet fully tasted the bitterness and sweetness of life. But you are not in that position. Our friend entrusted you as the one who can help bring her to the far shore."

Guided by the path opened through Vicharchan's words, Devan shared his life experience and said- "Vicharchan, today is the tenth day since Giyanchan's death. According to the reckoning of the thirteenth-day shraddha rites, the ritual of bathing and shaving must now begin."

Hearing Devan speak in terms of action, Vicharchan responded- "That is precisely why we have come here, to think through these matters."

At these words of support, flowers of patience bloomed quietly in Savitri's heart. Her mind filled with calm, though she said nothing.

Vicharchan then added softly- "Yes, that is what must be done."

In Devan's experienced mind, many questions rose at once. Savitri was caught in misfortune, and to pull her out of it felt like a human obligation. Yet the path to fulfilling that obligation was not straightforward. Society, after all, is divided into countless castes and sects. If villages were clearly divided along those lines, recognising each group would be easier. Each could place its own beliefs upon the soil of society and work toward the common good. But that was not the case. Within a single village, and even within a single community, so many castes and sects are interwoven that it is no longer simply a matter of one caste alone. Even within one family, three or four sects might coexist, each flowing along its own stream of belief regarding what is auspicious and what is not in the journey of life.

One sect considers shaving and bathing during the shraddha rites to be auspicious. Another considers it inauspicious. As a result, the practices associated with the tenth day–the day of bathing and

shaving–have become multicoloured, layered with differences. Among the younger generation, yet another way of thinking is emerging, where a shaved head itself is seen as inauspicious. And there are also sects whose followers never cut their hair or beard at all.

If all this remains tied solely to sentiment and belief around whether to cut hair or not, how will one ever reach the moon? Forgetting that the moon already resides in the face of the wife at home, and seeking to conquer it elsewhere, is no small irony.

As Devan's mind drifted through these thoughts, it returned to Savitri, sitting quietly before him. His gaze then fell upon Raghunath, seated beside her, and his thoughts turned in another direction. He asked- "Did Giyanchan say anything about the child?"

At the mention of Raghunath's name, Vicharchan responded quickly- "Brother, you have raised a most important point. Today itself there must be an accounting between father and son. Who owed what duty to whom, how much was fulfilled, and how much still remains."

Hearing this, Devan felt that the present moment should not be allowed to slip away like water. Many post-death rites needed to begin today, and some would also have to be concluded. It would be best, then, to start discussing the day's key responsibilities.

Devan asked- "Vicharchan, what tasks must be completed today?"

Vicharchan replied- "Brother, today the skull rite at the riverbank must also be performed."

To suggest that Vicharchan mentioned this simply to wash his hands of responsibility would be unfair. He merely understood that the rite was necessary and had to be done.

At the mention of the skull rite, Devan felt an inward smile rise within him. Yet, amid the rush of duties, shifting time from one task

to another would only cause delays. Even so, the flow of thought could not be held back. A reflection stirred in him: in life, there are two banks where skull rites are performed. And if one were to count the household itself as a kind of skull, then there would be three.

One bank is that of marriage, or other special milestones such as the sacred thread ceremony. The second is the bank of death, at the pond or riverbank. One is where a living being forms a family. The other is where, after death, a symbolic life is imagined and shaped through the performance of the skull rite.

As Devan considered the strange yet profound symbolism of this imagined life, his thoughts gathered strength, and he asked- "What is your view?"

Until now, Savitri had been thinking quietly about Raghunath. Not long ago, a disagreement had occurred between her and Giyanchan regarding his school admission. Giyanchan had believed Raghunath should begin school only after turning five. Savitri, judging by his height and maturity, had wanted to admit him at four and a half. In the six months that followed, nothing was resolved. And in the end, her husband had died.

From rocking Raghunath in the cradle to bearing the full weight of raising him, everything had now fallen upon Savitri's shoulders alone. She now stood between two lives. On one side lay the rites of bathing and shaving for her husband's shraddha after death. On the other was the task of shaping her son's thoughtful future by enrolling him in school. The six months of disagreement between the couple had run their course.

Raghunath's life had not become secondary in Savitri's mind. It was simply that the current of post-death rites, with its intense momentum, had surged ahead. Like any stream, its flow is strongest when the water is in motion. But when the season changes and the water begins to dry up, the stream too becomes still and weak.

Caught in uncertainty, Savitri said- "I will proceed according to whatever guidance I am given."

Hearing her speak, a strange conflict rose and stood firm in Devan's mind. The reason was clear. What Savitri understood about the shraddha rites, what Vicharchan understood, and what he himself understood were three different things. Without bringing these three understandings into harmony, how could any meeting of minds take place? And without such a meeting, how long could any decision truly endure?

Holding back the surge of his thoughts, Devan said- "Vicharchan, you have heard your friend's view. So will you not shape a path now?"

At Devan's words, a sudden flurry stirred within Vicharchan. On one side, he bore the weight of his friend's trust. On the other, Devan's words placed upon him the burden of society's expectations. By chance, his thoughts began to move forward. Just as when one climbs a mango tree, the fruits visible from above are not seen from the ground below, his perspective too began to shift.

Vicharchan spoke- "Brother, set against your measured and seasoned thinking, my own thoughts carry little weight."

For a moment, Devan felt that Vicharchan was trying to step aside and absolve himself of responsibility. But his conscience spoke at once. One may withdraw from what one is not bound to, but how can one walk away from a task in which one stands directly in the middle?

Devan felt that society had become maternal fetal bounding had dried up, what kind of child could grow there? His mind churned restlessly. For an instant, a rebellious thought even crossed his mind: why not defy it all, like the partridge whose defiance gave birth to the Taittiriya Upanishad? But he checked himself. The current of society today is neither easy to break nor wise to preserve exactly as it is.

We live in the twenty-first century. If we still believe that shraddha rites determine whether souls ascend to heaven or descend to hell, then why do we put such effort into building machines to explore other planets?

Year after year, on Matri Navami and during Pitru Paksha, feasts are held. Alongside annual household rituals, there are shraddha meals and rites, with offerings stretching from the pond's steps to the cowshed, to the very house where wealth and livestock are kept. There are countless forms of shraddha: the thirteenth-day ceremony, the half-monthly rite, the monthly rite, each with its own meaning, colours, and prescriptions.

As Devan's thoughts raced, his mind swayed from affection to opposition and back again. Stirred to intensity, he finally said- "Daughter, whatever feels right to you, I will accept it and stand behind you. Is that not so?"

Smiling, Savitri replied- "Yes, of course. What else could it be?"

Revealing his helplessness, Vicharchan said- "People have not spared me from blame. But what is one to do?" ❑

8.

Today marked one full month since Giyanchan's death. Tomorrow would be the new moon day, the very date on which he had passed away.

Savitri had not yet risen from her bedding when Bouki Dadi arrived and said- "Daughter, today the first shadow of Giyanchan and the child will appear."

She spoke more to herself than to Savitri. Savitri didn't respond, not even with a murmur of acknowledgment. Bouki Dadi was the sort of person who spoke whether anyone asked or not. Something always seemed to well up inside her and spill out. Some of her thoughts were useful, but many were like a bundle of mixed greens, not carefully selected fenugreek or spinach, but coarse summer patua leaves, the kind called kujraba patua. In such bundles, it becomes difficult to separate the nourishing from the harmful. Her thoughts were much the same, a mixture in which not everything could be taken to heart.

Having said what she felt compelled to say, Bouki Dadi left as quietly as she had come.

Still lying on her bedding, Savitri began to think. With both Devan Bhai and Vicharchan having firmly stood by her side, it would not be right to act on anything now without seeking their counsel. Once she regained full command over her life, she could act freely. But for now, she would not make any decisions without speaking to them first.

Yet Bouki Dadi's words lingered in her mind. She wished she could ask Devan Bhai right away, for doing so would bring peace to

her heart for the rest of the day. Just as moments accumulate into minutes, minutes into hours, and hours into days and nights, peace in each moment gathers into a peaceful life.

Then another thought arose. It was time to rise from bed. Everyone would be busy with their morning routines. It would not be right to trouble Devan Bhai over a small matter at such a time. She too had her own daily duties to attend to. Once those were finished, she would go to him and ask everything.

Another question surfaced in her mind. The shraddha rites had been completed seventeen days ago. Then what new ritual had Bouki Dadi spoken of today? Savitri did not yet understand that this very "shadow" would take on such a strange form that it would blur the lines between life and death. It would stand before existence in a way that made the living seem dead and the dead appear alive.

After completing her daily tasks, Savitri set out for Devan's house. Since Vicharchan's house lay along the way, she thought it best to stop and meet him as well. Vicharchan was standing at his door. Seeing Savitri, he said- "Friend, what brings you out so early in the morning on this wandering path?"

During Giyanchan's lifetime, Savitri had always felt a quiet reserve around Vicharchan, a soft shyness that hadn't left her even now. Standing without covering her face with the end of her sari, she replied- "Friend, Bouki Dadi came very early this morning and delivered a message. I am going to Devan Bhai to understand and think it through. Come along as well."

Without saying anything, Vicharchan fell into step beside her.

Devan had just finished his tea and betel and was about to set out for his fields when he saw them approaching. At once, he sat down on the wooden bench near the doorway. As they stepped onto the verandah, he gestured for them to sit with him on the bench.

On the way, Vicharchan had deliberately refrained from

repeating Bouki Dadi's words or asking Savitri any further questions. He felt that once Devan Bhai examined the matter, they would hear everything in due time. There was no need to probe in advance. It was also possible that their thoughts might differ, and if one later had to revise one's own position, it would hurt one's sense of propriety. Once propriety is wounded, harshness arises. There was no reason to let such harshness take root in the mind. It was far better that the three of them consider the matter together. The more thoroughly they churned the subject, the clearer and more settled their understanding would become.

As soon as Vicharchan and Savitri sat down on the bench, Devan said- "Son Vichar, I had just finished my tea and betel and was about to leave for the fields when I saw you two and stopped. It is still early morning, so drink some tea first. We'll talk afterwards."

At Devan's offer, Vicharchan's first impulse was to say he had already had tea. But he checked himself. A burden still remained unresolved among the three of them, and if, for any reason, Savitri had not taken tea, it would not be right to create an obstacle. So Vicharchan chose to remain silent. Savitri too said nothing. Her reserve had not vanished, but since it had not yet matured into full confidence, it gave rise to small hesitations in her behavior.

Seeing both of them silent, Devan sensed that something serious must have happened. Perhaps that was why they had come without even having tea. He thought it best to first calm their minds with water and tea before beginning the conversation.

Without repeating the offer, Devan called out firmly to his wife- "Bring water in the lota and bring the glasses. By the time they finish drinking water, the tea will be ready too."

Looking toward Vicharchan, Savitri said- "Brother, I have already had tea."

Hearing this, Vicharchan felt a flicker of regret. Why had he

not said earlier that they had already taken tea? But the moment had not yet slipped out of reach. So he spoke- “Brother, we are old-fashioned people, set in our ways. In our way of living, one drinks tea only after rising and completing the morning routine. But times have changed so much that even getting up from bed without tea now feels burdensome. So we too have become like that. Once the morning intake has gone into the mouth, we do not cross the threshold again. We have already had tea. We will not drink more. There have been complaints of gas.”

Without correcting or interrupting him, Devan simply said- “Seeing both of you here so early, I feel there must be something particular on your minds, Vicharchan.”

At the sound of his name, Vicharchan was taken aback. The reason was clear. In that moment, he felt like a flimsy cot made of reeds. Whatever burden Savitri was carrying, she had neither spoken of it herself, nor had he urged her to repeat what Bouki Dadi had said. So what could he say now? Yet remaining silent would not be right either. If he did not gently turn attention toward Savitri, she might even begin to suspect that Bouki Dadi had spoken to him and that he had failed to pass the matter on.

Encouraging her, Vicharchan said- “All these days, we thought of you as belonging to another household. But now that is no longer the case. Now we must think of ourselves as brother and sister, and together choose a path for the life ahead. So open your heart and tell Brother everything.”

The bond between a man and a woman has a dual form, one physical and the other mental. When the bond is forged on the mental level, the lotus of human life truly blooms.

Until now, a vast, unspoken shape had lain hidden in Savitri’s heart. In this moment, it seemed to awaken. She said- “Brother, now that I have placed my life before you, keep it as you see fit.”

Hearing her speak, a sudden jolt ran through Devan's mind. It came from a harsh rebuke rising within him. He felt as if he were scolding himself, for failing even to manage the weight of his own life, yet rushing to carry the burdens of others. But almost immediately, his chastened mind shifted, growing heavy like a monsoon cloud thick with promise. And as it hung within him, it began to drizzle softly, like the first fine drops of a Saawan rain.

What force in this world is greater than the creative strength of a human being? If a person reduces themselves to weakness, what becomes of the immense power they carry? It is a power capable not only of steering one's own boat across, but also of helping others reach the far shore. It is the power of recognising time, of standing fully in the present, and stepping forward into the future.

Smiling gently, Devan said to Savitri- "Until now, because of social ties, I had seen you in a different light. But since Giyanchan has passed away, since he is no longer among us, the ground of thought has shifted. The words you spoke–that you have placed your life in our hands–have stirred something deep within me."

At the word "stirred," Vicharchan's own mind quivered in response. He said at once- "Brother, society is society. Like a four-footed animal, sometimes it moves facing forward, sometimes it turns its back. There is no knowing when."

Vicharchan spoke this as a reflection on social life as he understood it. Savitri, however, felt that his words carried a truth meant for her. She checked herself, thinking it would be better to first understand clearly what lay in Vicharchan's mind.

She asked- "How is that, friend?"

Devan felt that if the conversation drifted further into side matters, the central task would slip behind. And once the task slipped behind, idle talk would inevitably move forward. From there, one would wander aimlessly through a world of words, and with time,

even life itself would begin to fray into falsehood and emptiness. It would be better, then, to straighten out the bend that had arisen in the understanding between Vicharchan and Savitri.

Yet another thought restrained him. It would be better if Vicharchan clarified his meaning first. So Devan chose to remain silent.

On hearing Savitri's question, Vicharchan's mind began to fidget, eager to respond. But when he lifted his eyes toward Devan, he sensed that Devan Bhai was absorbed in his own thoughts. It seemed better to hear Devan first and only then speak to Savitri. That did not happen. Devan swallowed his thoughts and drank them down in silence.

Vicharchan turned to speak to Savitri, then checked himself. He felt it would be better to address Devan Bhai first. So he said- "Brother, whether we understand it or not, we keep hearing it from the mouths of the world, from the mouths of people, that just as caring for a child is a duty, caring for a widow is also a duty. Gandhiji too established widow ashrams through which this duty of care was fulfilled. And yet, when one encounters a widow's face before setting out on a journey, the mind begins to flutter and clatter, fearing that seeing a widow before departure will bring misfortune."

Devan took Vicharchan's drifting thoughts seriously, but he did not let their weight sink too deep. He held them on the surface of his palm and said- "Vicharchan, the problem before us right now deserves our first attention. It will not be right to pick up society's fears and press down your own thinking beneath them."

Turning again to Savitri, Vicharchan said- "Brother, Giyanchan was a companion since childhood. You have seen this all along. He has died. The body, after all, is a house of illness and affliction, and it was through this that Giyanchan passed away. My friend is left with two children. Should we not, then, wish for her to

have strength and support?"

Hearing this, Devan felt that just as Vicharchan was still a child in understanding, Savitri too stood at the same tender threshold. It was not the right time, he realised, to tell them outright that strength and protection are not found outside but within one's own mind. The difference of gender lies only on the surface. Another thought followed soon after. It would be better to let Savitri speak first, and then to respond and guide her according to her words. In the end, the question was simple: what supports life, and what does not?

Devan said- "All these days, the way I understood you, your form and your relation were different. But since you have spoken of placing your life in our hands, I have begun to see you as a daughter. Just as a daughter in a family remains fully dependent on her parents, and the parents serve her with a devotion akin to that between a devotee and God, so too does care take its shape."

Hearing Devan's thoughts, Vicharchan's mind softened in the same way that Savitri's heart did. Her face slowly began to change colour. It was as if she felt she had found something precious, and Vicharchan felt the same. How could it be otherwise? Until now, just as Savitri had remained enclosed within her family, Vicharchan too had been confined within his own. But today, moving beyond the boundaries of family, rising above them, he began to see himself in broader social terms.

Society, after all, is an ocean. Within it dwell everything from shells and conches to great conches, from deadly poison to supreme nectar. And it is for the division and sharing of these that churning occurs. This has not happened only once, nor has it ceased to happen. It has occurred many times, and as long as life contains opposing forces, it will continue to occur.

Vicharchan said- "Brother, leave aside this talk of churning the ocean. Whoever understands will understand. Whoever does not, will

not. Counting stars of the sky does not make one count their own stars. One counts only the clouds one creates."

Hearing Vicharchan's words, Devan felt that the man he had once considered to possess a childlike understanding had, in fact, moved beyond that into a state of conscious, deliberate awareness. It would be better, he thought, that just as governance in a country is centralised yet functions through every citizen–and each citizen retains the right to shape life around that centre–they too should proceed thoughtfully.

Devan said- "Vicharchan, all three of us, along with our three families, wish to flow together at one point, within a single stream of thought. But before entering that stream, we must first shape our own course."

Devan's thought seemed fragmented and unclear to Vicharchan, and Savitri too grasped it only partially. Yet, if the three of them sat together and continued discussing matters, a course would gradually take shape, one that could eventually merge into a stream. For that to happen, everyone would have to speak openly. Only then could it become real.

This principle is seen clearly in politics. Parties have lost their ideological bearings. What they want to do has itself become uncertain.

Savitri spoke- "Brother, something unsettled my mind early this morning, so I came to ask him about it. At dawn, Bouki Dadi shouted across the courtyard like a crow, saying that today is the first shadow-day of Giyanchan."

Hearing Savitri's words, Devan became grave. His gravity arose from the vivid image that now formed in his mind, the future course of a family like Savitri's within the broader society. Society moves amid countless superstitions, and over these, layers of colourful gloss are constantly applied, day and night. To hold a

family like Savitri's upright as a family of the twenty-first century in such a setting is no easy task.

Moreover, the ideological race is so intense that, at first glance, everything in Lanka appears small, yet measures forty-nine cubits. It is natural to feel that when one's own height and breadth are only three and a half cubits, how can one stand against something forty-nine cubits tall? And what exists beyond that may be taller still. When one adds one's own three and a half cubits to forty-nine, the imbalance becomes all the more apparent.

Pushing Savitri's thought forward, Devan spoke- "Vicharchan, as a friend I consider you part of Giyanchan's family. That is why, first, the two of you must think together and become travellers on a single path. Only when you begin to walk that path, placing your feet upon it step by step, will you be able to become guides, those who walk ahead of the ideology."

Understanding Devan's words took both of them one and a half turns. By that, it meant that Vicharchan grasped part of the meaning of certain words, and Savitri grasped another part. As a result, on a path that should have been straight and clear to both, a slight distance arose. The sense of clarity that should have emerged in their minds did not come, and restlessness began to grow.

Savitri's life, which had been strained for six months, now seemed to demand a turn. Like a spectator standing at the edge of the sea, seeing nothing but water in every direction, she now saw only darkness ahead, a blindness born of the vapour rising from the water.

Yet, binding her life within the discipline of thought, she spoke- "Brother, until now I have regarded you as an elder brother, in the spirit of brotherhood. But more than that, I have also seen you as a father and a teacher. So for someone burdened like me, please show the path, what can be done?"

Hearing Savitri's words, Devan's mind drifted into a grove of

reflection. He had lived a disciplined life for sixty years, yet day after day, such turbulent winds arose that everything became covered in dust and confusion. In such a setting, even if one were to create a Chyawan-like elixir while standing beside the wall like the sage Chyavan himself, shaping a life in harmony with its surroundings is not something that can be done with a snap of the fingers or a whispered charm.

Remaining composed, Devan said- “Life is not a single task, nor is the task of life confined to a single day. So first, speak of the matter for which you have come today.”

Leading the way with Bouki Dadi’s message, Savitri said- “Early this morning, Bouki Dadi said that today is the first shadow day of so-and-so, meaning Raghunath’s father.”

Speaking plainly, Devan replied- “Do what your heart tells you. Everyone in the village knows that my family has followed the Kabir path for three generations now. So even if a family seems to stand apart within society, well-being still comes from that path. The whole day is before you. Do as you wish. As for the evening meal and refreshments, my invitation stands. The three of us will sit together, think with one mind and one voice, and move ahead. What follows will become clear later. Whatever is meant to happen will happen. Why worry, Vicharchan?”

With his straightforward nature, Vicharchan said- “Let us leave it to the time of the first evening, brother.” ❑

9.

Savitri and Vicharchan walked on, talking as they made their way back along the road. Savitri asked- “Friend, what should we do about what Bouki Dadi said?”

After coming into contact with Devan, just as Savitri’s dormant mind had begun to awaken, Vicharchan’s sense of conscious strength had also stirred. His way of looking at problems–and how to resolve them–had changed. Vicharchan said- “What we should do and what we should not do, should we decide that ourselves within our family, or should we act according to someone else’s bidding? If we cannot even make our own family this independent, then did we take birth only to be despised by the village?”

Hearing Vicharchan’s words, Savitri recalled a thought from six months earlier, a resolve she had made with her husband regarding Raghunath’s school admission. One part of the family had broken off and fallen away, just as a corner of a house breaks and collapses, yet people do not abandon the house because of it. Savitri began to reflect on the promise she had made with her husband. She was someone in her own right, yet she was also Raghunath’s mother.

Raghunath had grown big and unruly, but within the shared boundary between mother and father where a son or daughter resides, she had borne half the responsibility. The other half had now risen onto her head as a burden she could not set down without fulfilling. After many months, her mind had felt a little at ease, just yesterday. And in the midst of that, this morning Bouki Dadi had come calling, saying that today was someone’s first shadow day.

The life Savitri had lived so far–especially in these last six

months–had taught her a clear lesson. Whether it was doctors or healers, family or temple, everywhere money played its part. Seven months ago, when her husband was alive, whatever income the family had, on which it stood and moved forward, had now diminished greatly.

As Savitri looked toward her family again and again, she began to see new cracks appearing, and deep within her heart, a trembling rose, an unease about how such fissures could ever be filled. Throughout the day, she remained withdrawn, confined within the circle of her own household.

As the day faded and night began to fall, Vicharchan came and said- “Friend, has not Devan Bhai given us time for now?”

Showing her helplessness, Savitri replied- “Yes, he has given time, but...”

Pressing her thoughts down within herself, she stopped after saying "but" and fell silent.

Vicharchan’s restless mind, like that of a guest already invited, seemed eager to move ahead. Without giving it much thought, he said- “No buts at all. We are going now.”

Seeing Vicharchan’s excitement, Savitri objected,

“But it will soon grow dark. How can we leave the two small children alone in the courtyard at such a time?”

Just as a papad browns quickly on a heated pan, Vicharchan’s mind was ready at once. He blurted out,

“Then let us take both the children along.”

And that is what happened. Savitri, with Vicharchan and the two children leading the way, reached Devan’s house. As was his habit, Devan was sitting at the doorway. Catching sight of them from a short distance, he said- “Vicharchan, seeing you has filled my heart with great joy.”

Vicharchan did not quite grasp what Devan meant by "great joy." Until now, he had only understood joy and sorrow. So the meaning of this boundless joy did not fully register. As he reflected inwardly, he took it to mean joy at its farthest limit. Then another thought arose. Did not boundless mean without any limit at all, something without edges or boundaries? If there were no boundaries, how could one even speak of crossing a limit?

His thoughts tangled for a moment, but without offering any nod or murmur, he simply asked,

"What is it, Brother?"

Devan replied, as if he had already thought it through- "Vicharchan, the moment a person binds himself to time, half his boat of poverty crosses over. To carry the remaining half across, one must still struggle through life."

Savitri, understanding the thoughts of both men in her own plain way, quieted her mind and listened silently.

Just then, Rekha, Devan's granddaughter, arrived at the doorway with a bowl of puffed rice and three small plates. She placed them before the three of them and began serving. What remained after filling the three plates, she set between Raghunath and his sister.

After eating the puffed rice, drinking water, and finishing their tea, Vicharchan spoke- "Brother, darkness is slowly spreading. So let us first attend to the matter for which we spoke."

Devan replied- "Vicharchan, you and I are both men. Because of that, there are many social bonds from which we are already free. Savitri does not have that freedom. So it is necessary to think about her situation first."

What Savitri felt in her heart seemed to echo exactly what Devan said. Giving voice to her thoughts, she spoke- "Brother, what should I do about this fear? Whenever I step out of the house, my mind fills with anxiety about whether I will return home with my

honour intact or not."

Devan grasped the depth of her thought. Another understanding had already taken shape in his mind. In a society–meaning among village people–where there are no internal disputes, crimes against women are recognised as crimes by all, and collective opposition keeps many unjust acts suppressed. But in a society fractured by quarrels and rivalries, even grave injustices can occur in the name of enmity. In a divided society, some call such acts wrong, while others justify them as revenge.

Their village was not like that. Until now, the social current there had flowed in a balanced manner. That was why open and visible violence against women did not occur. If something happened in secret, that was another matter. Theft and secrecy, after all, exist in both kinds of wrongdoing.

There are places where physical transgressions occur with the consent of both man and woman, and places where they occur without consent. And even when harm occurs without consent, women often suppress it under the burden of social shame.

As Devan's mind moved closer to Savitri's thoughts, it became both tangled and clearer at the same time. He felt it would not be right to simply dismiss her concern. Yet remaining silent would not calm her either, especially when unrest had already settled in her mind. So he shifted the weight of the matter toward Vicharchan and said- "Vicharchan, your bond with her is closer than mine. You should reassure Savitri, so that such doubts may leave her mind."

Hearing Devan's words, Vicharchan felt a surge of twice strength within himself, like Valmiki's Bali from the Ramayana. In truth, the resolution of any problem is both ideological and practical. In this case, the problem was ideological. A practical problem arises after an incident. That had not happened here. Vicharchan said- "Brother, there are thousands, even millions, of friends in this world

who have staked their lives for one another. If, in the face of a widow's fear, we remain silent, lower our heads, and lock our mouths, then we are no men at all. I say this openly before you. The moment I hear of such cruelty in the life of my friend, from that very moment I will stake my own life to try to put an end to it."

Supporting him, Devan said- "Yes. What more can anyone do than this?"

With Devan's support for Vicharchan's words, the force of will within Savitri awakened. It is only when will awakens that a person can dedicate their life to its purpose. In villages and households, those who deliver sermons often repeat that desire is the basest impulse and should not be heeded. Yet such thinking overlooks the truth: willpower is precisely the force that binds a person to life and carries them toward their destination.

As practice begins, the power of energy takes shape. That is, desire finds strength and begins to grow, grasping life firmly and leading it onward to its goal. Only upon reaching that goal does desire transform into a charged will, which is the very substance of a meaningful life.

As Savitri's will strengthened, the exhilaration in her heart grew. Moved by feeling, she said- "Brother, I bind myself by my word between you both. As you give counsel and guidance, I will continue to act accordingly."

Hearing Savitri's devoted resolve, Devan felt a happiness akin to that of someone who has found a gold coin. Yet at once, another thought arose within him. Just as life has its limits, meaning how far one can live and attain life, so too there are limits to understanding and awareness. It would therefore be better to show Savitri a life philosophy that could test and expand the boundaries of her understanding. Otherwise, like the stones of Nala and Nila in the Ramayana, she might float upon the ocean yet fail to come together

at a single point.

Devan said- “Vicharchan, I am unable to understand the ground on which Savitri’s spirit of surrender stands.”

The word ground startled Vicharchan for a moment. But at once, his mind suggested that it was not the ground of a single issue, but the ground of life itself. That is, what were the structured limits of Savitri’s level of living. Vicharchan said- “Friend, now forget the old friendship tied only to Giyanchan. A bond of companionship between you and me will begin. So I say this plainly now. Among women, there are two major faults. First, speaking evasively. Second, hiding a thought or a matter. So before placing your thoughts before us, bind yourself by a vow to avoid both of these.”

Before Savitri could respond, Devan said- “Vicharchan, I do not reject your thought. But the two faults you speak of belong to the surface of life. When life, in a practical manner, tests its core principles and shapes itself accordingly, both these faults are automatically uprooted and disappear.”

Hearing Devan’s words, a sudden clarity arose in Vicharchan’s mind, just as it did in Savitri’s. Savitri said- “Brother, leaving everything else aside, I should first say what our resources were when my husband was alive and what they are now.”

Devan gathered Savitri’s thought and tied it into a firm knot before speaking- “You have framed your thinking well. Say first what lies in your heart.”

Savitri said- “Now the entire responsibility of the family has come upon me. But when Raghunath turns ten, will he not begin to shoulder that full burden himself? It was his father’s wish that Raghunath be educated properly. We see even in our own village that Gopinath’s father died just when Gopinath had been born, before his sixth-day rite had even been performed. Yet Gopinath’s mother educated him so well that he became a doctor. I too have the same

wish, that Raghunath should become such a person."

The many thoughts that fell from Savitri's lips were taken up by Devan, who, like Kabir Baba, began weaving each strand carefully into place. He said- "First, think about Raghunath's education. What have you done so far, and what remains to be done?"

Savitri replied- "Until now, time has simply slipped by in one way or another. Raghunath has already completed five years. For the past six or seven months, I have been thinking that we should get his name enrolled in school, because we see children even younger than him going to school. But my husband believed that Raghunath should be admitted only after completing five years. Because of this difference in thinking, there were arguments between the two of us. But…"

As her thoughts reached the memory of her husband, Savitri came to a halt at that boundary where her husband stood on one side and her son on the other. Her thoughts faltered, and she fell silent.

A child's tender life stirred compassion in Devan's heart. Sitting in attentive stillness, his eyelids gradually closed of their own accord, yet his ears remained fully open. Hearing Savitri fall silent after saying "but," Devan suddenly opened his eyes and asked- "But what?"

Vicharchan said- "There is no but. Keep saying what is in your heart."

Hearing Vicharchan's words, Devan remained silent. Recalling the earlier matter, Savitri spoke- "Perhaps he did not understand everything. Our family had five bighas of land. Out of this, ten kathas held trees and bamboo. As the trees and bamboo were cut and sold, in the same way, two bighas of cultivable land gradually began to be filled up."

Hearing the phrase filled-up land, a thought rose in Devan's mind. Even the remaining land, which had not yet been filled, would

not be sufficient even if cultivated properly using modern, scientific methods. But another thought followed at once. Men and women who are farmers have spent their entire lives farming according to their own understanding. Even they have not yet fully acquired the skill of present-day methods of agriculture. How, then, could Savitri–who had never even stepped into the fields–manage it now?

Moreover, there are families who consider tilling the land, meaning ploughing and breaking the soil, to be an improper act. Savitri did not belong to that kind of family. But it was certainly true that, like women in many other households, she too had always regarded farming as men's work and had kept herself away from it. This was different from poor families, where women work alongside men in the fields. Savitri was not among them.

Again, Devan's mind turned inward. Is life something of a single day, like a starving insect that lives for only an hour? Life is life. There is a life of thought, and there is a life of action or livelihood. Yet there is a difference between them. The life of thought shapes people according to one's own understanding of existence. The life of livelihood is a shared current in which the boats of many families move together to cross the river of being.

The further Devan's mind travelled along these reflections, the more complex they became. Gathering this complexity, he concluded that the first task was to steady Savitri's life, to draw a clear boundary and help her stand within it. Only then could each problem be taken up and untangled one by one.

As he reached this point of thought, a sudden clarity dawned on him. Savitri had suffered the loss of her husband, but the plans they had once hoped to build together had been left unfinished. A dense interruption had come in between. Setting aside the thought of farming, Devan said- "Savitri, if you take on too many tasks at once, nothing will remain under control. The first task now is this.

Tomorrow, have Raghunath's name enrolled in school."

Hearing the words "having Raghunath enrolled in school," memories from the past filled Savitri's mind with happiness. The reason for this joy was that the thought she had nurtured seven months earlier was now being planted in the soil, meaning brought into life. But at once her mind grew uneasy. On the very first day, when she would go to enrol Raghunath in school, what if she could not even offer the admission fee to the teacher?

In earlier times, when people lacked money, they still offered a small coin as a token to the teacher. That small coin was an unmarked piece of metal, which circulated locally. Later, a single paisa came to be offered. After that, rupees. Now, the amounts had reached into the thousands. All of this stirred a quiet anxiety within Savitri. For enrolling Raghunath, she did not have even a single rupee in her hand.

She said- "Brother, I do not have even one paisa in hand. How can I…"

Hearing Savitri's thought, Devan first paused, then broke into laughter. He laughed because, in Mithila's society, there had long existed practices where people helped one another financially for the sake of education. Many had even come together to establish and run schools. In today's world, those customs may have faded, but their memory remained.

Devan lifted his eyes toward Vicharchan. Catching his glance, Vicharchan said to Savitri- "Friend, am I a stranger, that just because you have no money in hand, the child's name will not be enrolled? From enrolment to whatever is needed now, everything will be taken care of. Tomorrow, we will go together and have Raghunath enrolled in school."

Hearing the arrangements for the next day, Savitri's mind rushed ahead. Such is life. Living life always strives to move forward.

In action, movement follows the rhythm of action, but thought knows no boundary or barrier. Savitri said- “Brother, if you could also help find a way for farming, then I could begin running the family on my own strength.”

Hearing Savitri’s thought, Devan reflected inwardly. Considering the size of her family, Savitri did not possess much land, and with only traditional farming, the future did not seem very promising. Yet another thought arose. Why not bind her life to purposeful work and move her life’s cart forward? He said- “Tomorrow, have the child enrolled in school. In the evening, I will come to your house myself. Then we will discuss farming and decide how to move forward. What do you say, Vicharchan?”

Vicharchan replied- “A hundred thoughts are your own, brother. This will not happen so quickly, like grabbing something from a leaf and licking it straight away.”

Looking toward Savitri, Devan said- “Now go. It is time for your cooking, and my own evening tasks are also being delayed. We will continue this conversation later.” ❑

10.

Fifteen years passed. Raghunath became an agriculture graduate. In his final year, he secured the first position. The groom is expected to arrive the day after tomorrow. This morning, Savitri was visited by Ladulal.

Savitri knew Ladulal as a farmer from the village, but alongside farming, he also worked as a marriage broker. Whether the work is governmental or related to social matters, there is always a middleman involved, like cottonseed between lint and fibre. There are two reasons such intermediaries exist: one is to sit between the parties, arrange matters, and earn a commission; the other is to guide the unaware and help them understand the process. Ladulal belonged to the first category-broker.

Until now, Savitri had only heard about marriage brokers. She had not encountered such dealings personally. So, to say she did not understand the nature of a broker would be inaccurate. She did understand, which is why a faint smile rose in her mind when she realised that a broker had come for Raghunath. Pretending to be innocent and unsure, Savitri asked- “So, what will I have to do?”

Taking the full responsibility upon himself, Ladulal replied- “You will not have to do anything. The entire responsibility is mine.”

Savitri said- “When a broker comes to the house, would it not be improper if we did not offer him something to eat or drink?”

Ladulal had already understood everything. After all, the commissioner sahib, a close associate of his, had clearly stated that financial matters should not obstruct the proceedings.

Ladulal said- “The commissioner sahib himself will come with

five others. He will make all the arrangements. You only need to give your consent that Raghunath's marriage will take place at your house."

Hearing Ladulal's words, Savitri restrained herself inwardly. This was a matter of the household, no ordinary matter, but the first major decision of her son's life. Finalising a marriage without consulting Visharchan and Devan Bhai would be inappropriate. Yet, if she said this directly to Ladulal, he might think she was someone without connections, someone lacking judgment.

Almost immediately, another thought arose. Her son's education was complete; the next step was to shape the family's future. Marriage, after all, was inevitable.

The life Savitri had lived over the past fifteen years, in close partnership with Devan and Visharchan, had taught her much. She no longer saw herself as merely a householder, she had become the head of the household. This wasn't just a matter of thought; she had proven it through action. If this weren't true, how could a family with barely four bighas of land have educated its son into an agriculture graduate through farming alone?

From five bighas, she sold one, set aside the filled land, gathered scattered plots into one, arranged irrigation through boring and pumps, levelled the fields, and made them her own. Savitri had done it all.

She said- "When the courtyard is open, how can we stop anyone from entering? Whoever comes, whenever they come, they are welcome. I am prepared."

Seeing the firmness in her resolve, Ladulal became animated. Clapping lightly, he said- "Just as you have a strong, well-built body, so will the daughter-in-law be. Think of it as a match like Ram and Sita. Raghunath's pairing will be just the same."

Savitri's life had always moved in rhythm with time, and she

did not wish to prolong an unnecessary conversation. Still, this was a family matter that could not be left unresolved. Bringing the conversation to a clear conclusion, she asked- "At what time will you come the day after tomorrow?"

Being a broker by nature, Ladulal was skilled at tailoring his words to the moment. He replied- "For now, consider it fixed. This evening I'll let you know whether it will be early morning or later in the day."

Savitri said- "That will do,"

and fell silent.

In any case, Ladulal's intention had been to cast his net like a CID officer, circling, weaving, and gradually entangling Savitri until he secured her firm confidence in the arrangement. But Savitri had not reshaped her personal life merely to bind herself unquestioningly to societal norms. Acting without understanding the logic of social customs–driven only by personal calculations–would never be right.

Yes, one can grasp the current of society and merge one's own stream into it. Yet, the social current is complex and multi-layered, flowing through many channels shaped by circumstance. Steering one's own course through it is not easy, but neither is it impossible.

What danced in Ladulal's mind was this: his exchange with Savitri had been brief, yet he believed that the commissioner sahib was a man of such stature that he could sit comfortably, enjoy himself, and still continue earning commissions. Then another thought struck him. It was equally possible that the same commissioner sahib–who enjoyed wealth while seated–might also, from early morning until noon, labour like an ordinary ploughman, double-ploughing four kathas of land. That reality was something people rarely considered.

Ladulal was a seasoned broker, well-versed in such games. So, balancing his thoughts inwardly, he reached this conclusion: just as

there are countless paths to completing a task, there are just as many to leaving it undone. Yet one thing had clearly fallen from Savitri's lips, if they came to her doorstep, she would receive them. That alone made the meaning plain enough. The work would proceed.

Ladulal then reminded himself that, just as the clerk–the commissioner sahib's close associate–had entrusted this responsibility to him, the outcome was nearly assured. So why not collect the first instalment of commission, like an Indira Housing Scheme payment, and pass along the information about the visit?

Savitri returned to her work, while Ladulal, murmuring the chants of marriage arrangements to himself, took his leave and walked home.

In truth, Savitri's life had not turned mechanical. There was no need for mantras, nor for chanting them. Her life was not locked into rhythm with time the way the moon and the sun move in fixed courses through night and day. That is why Savitri's mind was never empty. A mind is a mind, it dances sixty thousand times a day and night. Savitri's mind continued to dance in just that way, circling around thoughts of Ladulal.

As her mind danced, another thought arose. Ladulal had already made his own arrangements for the evening. In the meantime, there was still time to consult her friend Visharchan and Devan Bhai, who was like a father to her. A new person was about to enter the family, and it was necessary that this person be suitable. At the same time, it was equally important that the family be worthy of receiving another human being.

Caught in this inner conflict, Savitri remained restless until her own mind reminded her that this was not such a great problem. They were human beings. And what difficulty was there in living like human beings? Just as the forest nurtures the lion, the lion too, in its own way, protects the forest.

It was still early morning, a time of fresh beginnings. One could see it as a golden opportunity in the family's life, a golden moment. Everything was rising in the east. So first, she would strengthen the material foundations of her life. Then, before evening, before Ladulal's message arrived, she would speak face to face with both Devan Bhai and her friend Visharchan. Whatever understanding emerged from that conversation would guide her next words to Ladulal. For now, what had taken place was nothing more than casual talk at a roadside halt.

At four in the afternoon, Savitri's instinct told her that Ladulal's urgency suggested he might even arrive that very evening to push the matter forward. It would be better to prepare herself in advance. There was work to do, not just any work, but work for the family. Work that would not only compensate for the long period of collapse and decline, but also mark a turning point and open the door for a new human presence in their lives.

Seeing the rising form of her family, Savitri's mind felt suddenly lighter and more resolved. She decided this task had to take priority. Putting the courtyard in order, Savitri set out.

Seeing her arrive, Visharchan said- "Friend, an early arrival this morning?"

Holding her thoughts within herself, the thoughts of her son and his marriage, Savitri replied- "Friend, something is stirring in the family, so I've come to think it through."

In truth, Visharchan could not fully grasp what was moving through Savitri's mind, but he sensed that it was something important. Otherwise, she would not have come. Then another thought arose in him. Who was he to treat a serious concern as an ordinary matter? It would be better to understand Devan Bhai's perspective on the same issue, from the same point of view.

Visharchan said- "Friend, when we place Devan Bhai at the

forefront of all our thinking, it would not be right to take any step without consulting him. So let us go to him. We will share our thoughts with him and think it through together, reaching a common understanding."

Savitri said- "Very well."

Both Visharchan and Savitri went to Devan's place. Devan still had some unfinished work from the late afternoon, which he was completing. Seeing the two of them, he set his work aside and said- "Is there something important, Visharchan?"

Before Visharchan could speak, Savitri said- "Yes, Bhaiya. This evening, Ladulal is coming to talk about Raghunath's marriage. That is why it seemed right to consult you first."

The moment he heard the word "marriage," Devan's thoughtful mind reflected that when a major matter comes before us, the importance of smaller tasks fades. It would therefore be proper to settle Savitri's concern first.

Devan said- "Ladulal is a broker. Brokerage is his profession. So whatever business he comes for, he must have already arranged everything. What has he said?"

Savitri replied- "Yes."

Devan asked- "What has he said?"

Savitri said- "He said that the commissioner sahib's daughter is involved, and that is why he came."

Devan asked- "And what exactly did he say?"

Savitri replied- "He said only this much, that the day after tomorrow, the commissioner sahib himself will come with the marriage proposal for his daughter."

Hearing Savitri's words, many questions arose in Devan's mind. In today's circumstances, it seemed astonishing that a person of the commissioner's rank would offer his daughter to a household

as modest as Savitri's. Yet, to say it was impossible would not be entirely true. Society is already divided by caste boundaries, and within those divisions, mismatched marriages have begun to emerge. Alongside this, Raghunath's merit had risen significantly. The family might be simple, but at the university, Raghunath had secured first place in the agriculture faculty. That was no small achievement.

In today's world, examination results are rarely awarded purely on merit. They are often influenced by connections and power. Even so, it would be incorrect to claim that merit has completely vanished. However small its share may be, it still survives. And it was precisely this remaining presence of merit that had brought Raghunath to the top.

When Devan lifted his head and looked at Savitri, she appeared like a fledgling bird stretching its beak toward its mother in hope of feeding. Yet the questions before him were complex. To treat such questions lightly would be immature. Raghunath had already earned his graduate degree and was now an adult. In such a situation, it would hardly be appropriate to say anything without first understanding Raghunath's own view.

True, society has long accepted that arranging a son or daughter's marriage falls within the bounds of parental responsibility. In the era of child marriage, the situation was very different from today. People then lived under conditions resembling bondage, where even survival felt uncertain. Parents married off their children at a young age as a way of fulfilling their duty. Life itself followed a single path. By a single-track life, one means an agriculture-based existence alone.

But the modern world has become multi-tracked. As a result, the structure of the family has grown increasingly complex. In such a situation, if every issue is not examined thoroughly in advance, there is always the danger of an outcome like the mixture of ghee and honey. As long as the proportions are unequal, the mixture remains

nourishing. But the moment they become equal, it turns into poison.

Immersed in thought, Devan suddenly realised that just as time holds significance, place too has its own weight. The truth was that they themselves were not the ultimate custodians of society. Understanding and resolving every knot within it was not their sole responsibility. And yet, the burden of thinking still fell upon them.

Seeing the dense forest of the future ahead, and before steadying himself or stepping into that thicket, Devan asked Visharchan- “What do you think, Visharchan?”

Like a cleanly struck cricket six, Visharchan replied- “Brother, what thought of my own can I place before you? For now, I am only trying to understand and learn from you.”

Accepting Visharchan’s reply as fair, Devan reflected inwardly. Why not first understand the feelings of everyone involved–Savitri’s and Raghunath’s–before expressing his own view, and only then draw the boundary of a decision? If this was not done, the entire burden of gains and losses would fall upon him alone.

But another thought quickly corrected him. Since Savitri had come with hope in her heart, it would not be right to send her back empty-handed. Then his mind shifted again. It is only when one question leads to another, and problems confront problems, that the hope of resolution and clarity for the future begins to emerge. Devan felt a sense of calm.

He said- “Savitri, let us begin with the first question. In the eyes of society, I am your brother-in-law and you are my sister-in-law. Between us, there is a social bond that does not allow for open and unrestrained conversation. And when conversation is not open, how can one understand what lies in the heart? So, if I address you by your name, Savitri, please do not consider it improper.”

Hearing Devan’s words, past cultural impressions stirred in Visharchan’s mind, and the same happened in Savitri’s, causing two

forms of hesitation to rise within them. Yet, because of the fifteen-year bond shared among the three of them–Devan, Visharchan, and Savitri–Savitri had begun to understand what lay in Devan's heart, and Devan too had learned to read Savitri's inner world. That was why firmness had gradually entered Savitri's thinking.

Giving voice to what rose from within, Savitri said- "Brother, in social terms I do consider you my brother-in-law. But since you do not have a daughter of my age, would it not be more proper to consider you father-like? When a father is present, if he calls one directly by name, should that not bring happiness rather than discomfort?"

Visharchan's mind responded like a gently tuned flute. As the note settled, he spoke- "Brother, I understand this much. If someone is an elder brother, then by virtue of brotherhood, we too have become elders. So who can say that what appears as a sixteen-fold share will not turn into thirty-two or even sixty-four?"

Seeing level ground ahead, Devan said- "Savitri, in our part we say, 'Fish in the water and division of nine huts.' The discussion about Raghunath's marriage has only just begun. A relationship between two people from two different societies does not come into being in a single day. As time passes, and as the situation demands, we will continue to think through each matter step by step. What do you think, Visharchan?"

Agreeing, Visharchan replied- "A hundred thoughts are yours, brother. Friend, when Ladulal comes this evening with his message, tell him to fix a definite time. That way, just as the commissioner sahib will come with five people, we too will invite five people from our side for discussion."

"Very good," Savitri said.

"Brother, I will go now. Whatever further discussion takes place, I will convey it as it unfolds."

Exactly at six in the evening, at the first dusk, Ladulal arrived at Savitri's house. The first instalment of payment had gone well for him, so a flush of prosperity, like the greenness that spreads when urea fertiliser is applied, showed clearly on his face and in his mood. He also carried boundless confidence in his own cleverness. How could he not? Where it takes little time to cut a man's ear, he believed the ears of women are already half-cut and need only the slightest touch.

Just as people once said of the elephant that it abandoned the world in fear, claiming that a man of three and a half cubits could split it in half, and that cutting half an elephant would take too long, yet everyone can see the outcome. A man of three and a half cubits now rides on his back, goading him forward with a hook, making it move this way and that.

In the broker's style, Ladulal said- "The family's fortune has awakened."

Hearing Ladulal's words- "the family's fortune has awakened," many questions rose at once in Savitri's mind. But the life she had lived over the past fifteen years had brought her to firm ground. Because of that, the very meaning of the word fortune had changed for her. Wanting to make this clear, Savitri said- "What fortune?"

Just as shoe polish is applied to leather to make it shine, Ladulal glossed over his thoughts and said- "Understand it this way. The road to the capital is opening. Those people, the commissioner sahib and his kind, have not only become kings who wield power, they also enjoy royal comforts. If a daughter from such a family comes into your home as a daughter-in-law, how can that not be called fortune?"

With the plainness of a speaker whose words carry little ornament but much unvarnished thought, Savitri replied- "Those

whose destiny holds royal pleasures may enjoy them. What is that to me? I am content with what I have. It is evening now. Darkness will gradually spread, along with the household's unfinished work. So let us first bring this discussion into order."

Ladulal was sharp-tongued, but his world was narrow. His life revolved solely around brokerage, and because of that, his understanding and vocabulary were shaped by that trade alone. For this reason, he could not fully grasp Savitri's meaning. Yet such talkative people have this trait: whether they understand something or not, their mouths keep moving just the same.

Ladulal said- "Fair enough. I too have my own complications. When I leave here, I must go to the southern hamlet to bring milk, and the shop's work is also falling behind. What can one say? Whether I eat poison or honey, the waiting remains the same."

Though Savitri felt a quiet irritation at not being heard, she also understood the demands of time and the needs of her household. She said- "First, consider the message you have brought."

As if a venomous creature had bitten him in an unguarded moment, Ladulal was jolted. He said- "The matter is settled. The day after tomorrow, the commissioner sahib will come with five people."

Savitri asked- "Will they come in the early morning or in the afternoon?"

Ladulal had fixed the day, but the time had slipped his mind. Slightly flustered, he replied- "They are important people, after all. They are not ascetics who rise at dawn and begin their discipline in the sacred hours. Such people sleep at ease and leave their beds around nine o'clock to attend to their affairs. So take it to be the afternoon."

Savitri said- "Very well. Go now. Further thoughts will unfold in their own time."

As he was leaving, Ladulal added- "One thing I will say right

now. This is the business of important people, so let as few people as possible know about it."

Ladulal's words struck Savitri's mind with a sharp jolt. The reason was clear. The marriage of a son or daughter is not the concern of a single family alone. It is an essential rite involving many families. When it is a son's marriage, what sense is there in keeping it hidden? Ten wedding guests will go, ten women will sing songs from the turmeric ceremony to the farewell ritual. In such a setting, how could the matter remain confined to just a few people?

But at once, Savitri gathered her thoughts and held them within. She reflected that it would not be right to conceal the matter from her own community. So, just as five people from the bride's side–that is, the commissioner sahib's group–would come, it would be proper to place the matter before five people from her own community as well.

In the midst of such pressure, she thought of the fifteen years that had passed. They had been lived with patience and dignity. Now her son had grown into a man, standing on his own feet. How much of the life ahead would truly be unlivable?

Savitri said- "If there is no drum to be beaten, even then those connected to our family will surely come to know."

As he walked away, Ladulal said- "At four o'clock, call those people."

Savitri replied- "Very well."

On the third day at four in the afternoon, when Devan and Visharchan reached Savitri's house, they learned that the bride's party's vehicle had suffered a puncture on the way and would arrive fifteen minutes late.

With the air of a court-goer, Visharchan remarked- "What a strange game the world plays, brother."

Hearing the words "strange game," Devan asked, slightly

taken aback- “What do you mean, Visharchan?”

Visharchan replied- “Brother, all your life you have been someone who neither ran after things nor stumbled into them. So you may not know much about courts and offices. But I am not like that. Unless one goes to court, how can one understand its ways? And unless one goes to jail, how can one know how jail functions?”

Hearing this, Devan said- “Yes, that is true.”

Devan had spoken simply, but Visharchan sensed that a new weight had entered his words. So he pressed on, turning a tone of feeling into one of instruction.

“Brother, if you miss a single day’s appearance in court, a warrant is issued. But those who preside over the court may not appear for months, even years, and nothing happens. Is that not the strange game of the world?”

Just as Devan’s mind kept circling around the arrival of the commissioner sahib, Visharchan’s thoughts too were moving restlessly. Yet, with time in hand, each was quietly occupied with his own reflections. Savitri was seated there as well, along with Raghunath and his younger sister, Sunita.

It occurred to Devan that, while the brokers had not yet arrived, it would be good to understand what lay in Raghunath’s heart. But immediately, another thought stopped him. When questions concern someone directly, that person alone should be the one to answer them. Still, one thing remained. If anything awkward were to happen in front of others, some responsibility would fall on him as well.

Then, softly, another image rose in Devan’s mind. Just as a drop of rain falling under the Swati star makes its way through the depths of the sea and, entering the open mouth of an oyster resting on the seabed, turns into a pearl, so too can a pearl of thought be grasped by carefully probing the deeper meanings of life. Even if a thought rises too high or sinks too low, it can still be brought back into balance

through reflection.

With this understanding, Devan's mind settled. He felt that, for the moment, the situation was proceeding as it should.

At a quarter past four, one commissioner accompanying the commissioner sahib, a third man acting as their lead clerk, one broker from the bride's side, and Ladulal himself all arrived together at Savitri's house. As soon as they arrived, the household offered them water to wash their hands and feet. Was this because of coronavirus? No. It was because of the customs and conduct passed down by their ancestors. But since none of them was willing to remove his shoes, washing the feet was out of the question.

Tea was served. The clerk said to Ladulal- "First, Ladulal, introduce everyone properly from both sides."

After the introductions were done, the bride's-side broker said- "Ladulal, tell Savitri that we have come to ask for her son's hand."

As soon as the broker spoke, Savitri replied,

"In Mithila, the tradition has always been that the requests of guests who come to the doorstep are honoured. That tradition is still alive."

What each person gained or did not gain from Savitri's words remained unspoken, held within their own minds. Devan, however, observed everything with quiet satisfaction, though he said nothing.

The clerk then said- "The burden of the boy's employment does rest on the commissioner sahib. As for the customary process of marriage in between, we are ready to proceed in whatever manner Savitri decides."

Hearing this, Devan turned to Visharchan and said- "Visharchan, we are only third parties here. Would it not be right first to understand the boy's view, Raghunath's view?"

Responding with a firm nod, Visharchan said- "Yes, that must

be done."

Until now, social practice had generally been such that no opinion was sought from those whose marriage was being arranged. So to everyone present, this felt like a new custom.

With a glance, the bride's-side broker signalled Ladulal to ask the question. Until now, Ladulal had spoken only with Savitri, so a fear rose in his mind as well. If, like a door bolt suddenly coming loose, things took an unexpected turn, then everything done so far could be washed away. And he alone would bear thirty-two times the blame for not having sounded things out earlier, back when such thinking was not yet common in society.

Swallowing his unease, Ladulal asked Raghunath- "Son, everything depends on you now. So speak for yourself and tell us what you think."

Raghunath, a twenty-year-old young man, was fully satisfied with the life he had lived so far. He had also been blessed with favourable circumstances. Those circumstances were these: he had grown up in a middle-level farming family, and through Savitri's closeness to Devan, mother and son together had become farmers of the present age.

A farmer of today means this: even if he does not yet fully understand the twelve-month agricultural cycle, he has organised his limited cultivable land in such a way–from monsoon crops to winter cultivation–that throughout the year, like Jagannath, one crop or another keeps coming home, and the fields never stand idle.

As an agriculture graduate, Raghunath had come to understand the deeper value of land. Because of this, a firm resolve had taken shape in his mind. Just as his family had remained a farming family until now, it would remain so in the future. And just as his mother

had given him life by being a mother, she would continue to live as a mother for as long as she lived, just as she always had.

At the same time, another thought often rose within him. Even though the country belongs to farmers, neither a true spirit of farming nor the will to live a farming life seemed to have awakened among farmers themselves. But whatever that may be, what did it matter to him? His own life and the history of his family lay ahead of him.

Giving voice to his firm resolve, Raghunath said- “I have no intention of taking up a job. I was born into a farming family, and my intention is to live a farming life.”

The moment Raghunath said that he did not wish to take up a job, everyone began looking at one another. Devan looked towards Visharchan, Savitri towards Devan. The bride’s-side commissioner looked at the other commissioner, Ladulal at the clerk. Yet no one opened their mouth to say anything.

Seeing this silence, Devan spoke- “Just as the boy has expressed his view in his own words, should not at least this much come from the girl’s side as well, that she can or cannot become part of a farming family?”

Hearing Devan’s words, Visharchan said- “Even now one might argue that parents have long arranged marriages for sons and daughters without asking them. But the authority of such thinking began to weaken from the point where child marriage itself began to be questioned. Today, the situation has naturally changed to one where marriages take place between adult men and women.”

The commissioner sahib said- “This is a question between two lives. That is why we cannot respond immediately. And yet, human beings are still human beings. A person does not possess unlimited power to shape life entirely on their own.”

Visharchan added- “This is the question of creating a new family. So there is certainly a need to reflect on it with seriousness.”

Casting his net loosely, like an international trader, Ladulal said- “Clerk sahib, marriage is a sacred rite. It cannot be rushed. If we continue discussions calmly, the work will surely be done. That will mean allowing some more time to pass.”

Hearing Ladulal’s words, everyone rose at once and took their respective paths.

Notes